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PYRAMID

JOAN

CRAWFORD

PYRAMID ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE MOVIES

HEN HARVEY

JOAN CRAWFORD

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A Pyramid Illustrated History of the Movies

by

STEPHEN HARVEY

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To my late grandmother, Clara S. Borkovitz,
who started me writing in the first place.

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INTRODUCTION: THE QUINTESSENTIAL STAR

The process of attaining stardom in the movies has always been haphazard and unpredictable, involving chance and accident far more than forethought. In the long history of the movie industry, for every hotly publicized "find" there have been innumerable performers who toiled obscurely for years before achieving the same distinction. Only through hindsight can it be said that the success of the great screen personalities was inevitable. Considering that Joan Crawford was an indisputable star long before the majority of living Americans were born, it must seem to many that as long as there have been movies there has been Crawford, as accomplished and unmistakable a personality fifty years ago as she is today. As present-day audiences watch her films, they see an actress whose grasp of her skills may vary from film to film, but who undeniably possesses in full measure that ill-defined gift called star quality. Surely she always had it; one can't imagine Crawford as ever having been as ordinary and anonymous as the audience that for years genuinely worshiped her, and still regards her with affection and more than a little awe.

The facts of the matter are quite to the contrary, however. The wonder really is that such an undistinguished personage as the Crawford of the mid-twenties should ever have attained renown, much less held such a tenacious grasp on it all these years. When an adolescent chorus girl with the improbable name of Lucille Le Sueur arrived in Hollywood in 1925, she was endowed with a short-term movie contract and practically none of the requisite qualities for stardom. She weighed twenty pounds too much for her height, dressed in a gauche parody of current fashion, and spoke with a hearty dose of the nasal twang of her native Midwest. Furthermore, the closest she had ever come to acting had been a spot in the chorus line of a Broadway revue.

At the time, the top female stars at MGM were Mae Murray, Lillian Gish, Marion Davies, and the rapidly ascendant Norma Shearer, knowing professionals all. In addition there were tens of lesser-known starlets and ingenues already ensconced at the studio, who

were infinitely better schooled and poised for the limelight than the obscure Miss Le Sueur. Those who noticed her at all in those days later were to recall only a vivacious girl with a nervous, raucous laugh, large and expressive eyes, and mounds of frizzy hair.

Of course, the irony is that nearly a half century later Lucille Le Sueur, long since transmogrified into Joan Crawford, stands nearly alone as an enduring link to the Hollywood of mute horror, passion, and mirth. The Misses Murray and Davies are long since deceased, Norma Shearer has been in retirement for more than thirty years, and such names as Eleanor Boardman, Alice Terry, and Aileen Pringle—all considerably more prominent figures at MGM than Crawford at the time—are virtually forgotten. Crawford has never been long out of the public eye for the last five decades, and the seventies are proving to be no exception. She is still actively sought for interviews and television appearances, and dispenses her services as professionally and efficiently as the corporation of which she is an executive distributes Pepsi. She was never the most erotic or mythic or even probably the most talented of the really fabled women of the screen, but if one human metaphor were required for the appellation of "movie star," Joan Crawford undoubtedly would be the one.

Although those traits that go to make up star quality are intangible at best, there are certain basic truths that have always applied to the genus "movie queen" in general and to Joan Crawford most particularly. Stars, first of all, were presumed to be larger than life; recognizably human, of course, but somehow endowed with more of the attributes of physique and personality and fewer of the imperfections that plague mere people. Everything about Miss Crawford has always been triumphantly outsized: her luxuriant eyebrows, sensuous half-melon mouth, granite promontory jaw, those jutting, contoured cheekbones, and of course her trademarked hyperthyroid eyes and shoulders of near-quarterback proportions. Even those physical traits that were more or less to scale were made to seem superhuman through Crawford's forcefulness and discipline. Though only of ordinary height, like fellow screen legend Gloria Swanson, Crawford was able to maintain the illusion of extraordinary height and presence through a combination of imperial carriage and the sort of self-assurance on screen that implied that even if her stature was bested by some, she was otherwise bigger and more impressive than anyone else and she knew it.

A more important truism of star-


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dom is that the personality in question is entirely singular, and has brought to the screen some combination of elements that has never quite been present before and could never be duplicated by another actor. Certainly this has always been true of Crawford, whose potent combination of the indomitable and the vulnerable both defined an entire generation of Depression-bred American women and transcended it as well. No other film actress ever got anywhere trying to emulate her, but in another measure of the one-time potency of stardom, multitudes of female fans starved themselves and went into hock trying. As with practically every major film actress of her era, Crawford's great popularity was based on the fact that the fans loved *her*, not really the roles she filled. The individual films she made served primarily to preserve a continuity for the Crawford persona to thrive on, not really as single entities in themselves. Taken as a whole, most of them simply provided a composite portrait of the star herself.

The quintessential Crawford character itself is far more complex than the jibes of the condescending intellectuals in her heyday ever conveyed. Time after time the talents of the actress beneath the mask of the star managed the delicate task of balancing an array of contradictory traits into a harmonized whole. The roles that Crawford made her own were ambitious individualists both willing and capable of carving out a secure niche in society for themselves; yet lest these characters were to seem too formidable for audience identification, they were tempered with the softer, supposedly more feminine qualities as well. For good or ill, Crawford also longed eternally for romance, bound by the conventional rigidities of Hollywood. Sometimes her conflict focused on the clash between love and self-advancement; often the crux of the matter was that old dilemma, lust versus duty, particularly during those triangular liaisons in which Crawford was so often embroiled. One way or the other she was usually compelled to suffer inordinately—sometimes stoically, sometimes hysterically, but always with extraordinary style.

Crawford also managed to straddle the balance between the common and the urbane in her performances, conveying the most vivid attributes of both. When playing factory girls she was proletarian and blunt, but never cheap; she always implied the sensibility of one who appreciated genteel ways and the fruits of a better way of life. When switching to socialites, Crawford tempered the toniness of her gowns and manner with an air of earthy good sense. Only occasionally did

she tip the scales too far toward the ritzy or the sluttish, and by her subsequent film she invariably rectified the mistake and returned to her rightful place as the public's Joan once more.

More importantly, her female fans—and the majority of her most rabid following was always composed of women—genuinely saw her as a fantasy extension of themselves and their own lives. Crawford's impoverished childhood was sufficiently publicized for her public to know that she had literally worked her way from the laundry to the chorus to the top, and her films were merely the glamorized retelling of the fact. The intelligentsia may have regarded her as vulgar and obvious, but to the lower-middle-class audiences that flocked to the Loew's Paradise whenever her name bejeweled the marquee, she was Horatia Alger—a down-to-earth Jane who through ambition and hard work made it to the summit and acquired a little class along the way.

With all the American lip service paid to the virtues of individuality and pluck, thirties audiences were particularly sympathetic to Crawford because they realized that every triumph she achieved was due to her own tireless efforts. Many of her contemporaries at Metro had their own personal Svengalis shaping their careers and images: Shearer had Irving Thalberg, Garbo had her countryman Mauritz Stiller, and Marion Davies, naturally, had William Randolph Hearst. The only real mentor Joan Crawford ever had in Hollywood was Joan Crawford. It was she who transformed herself into a unique symbol of glamour and attainment from the anonymous chorine of before and she who fought for meaty parts when everyone in the front office wanted her to remain the world's oldest Dancing Daughter. Crawford was also canny enough to transfer her remarkable offscreen drive into her film performances. Rarely have a private life and a screen personality been as closely linked; the result was that audiences felt the two were the same and responded all the more for it.

Yet Crawford's most remarkable quality of all has undoubtedly been her staying power. No other actress has had such a long and continuous star career in movies, which is all the more astonishing since her greatest vogue occurred forty years ago. She has been deemed passé at least once in every decade since she started, and each time she managed to pull a trump card from her deck and emerge stronger than ever. Stardom is a matter of timing at least as much as talent, and Crawford has always had an amazing second sense of the appropriate moment to shift gears and widen her range.

When the carefree flapper began to pall, she turned to beleaguered blue-collar girls, and when that novelty faded she moved on to chic heiresses, then to character roles—insecure matrons and more recently to aging Lizzie Bordens. Along the way she has tried sophisticated comedy, song-and-dance fests, Westerns, even ice extravaganzas—anything to prolong her fame—and most of them worked. They succeeded because, however the details varied, the essential Crawford drive and spirit remained constant. Whatever she played, she was always Joan, the woman who had survived despite the most trying obstacles and now commanded her public to witness her triumph over temporary adversity. No matter how tragic the fate of the character she impersonated, one always knew that Crawford would soon be back to add another chapter to her saga. However tremulous her eyes or misplaced her judgment in men, she remained indestructible.

Crawford's professional acumen would have availed her nothing had she not possessed such an extraordinary grasp of screen acting technique to accompany it. Her craft is founded on the fact that although her manner has always been distinctly her own, it relied surprisingly little on particular mannerisms that might ultimately bore an audience. Her style was really based more on general qualities than on idiosyncrasies. At times her demeanor became too regal, the rich voice too cluttered with broad a's and soft r's, but in a sense even that was expected and even desired by her public—the more hauteur she affected, the surer was her claim to the crown of movie queendom.

As a certified film star Crawford's most reliable virtue has been the sense of absolute conviction she brought to everything she attempted. Often in interviews she has remarked that the roles she had most enjoyed playing, like Mildred Pierce or Helen in *Humoresque*, were characters she intuitively understood and identified with; the struggling chorister of *Dancing Lady was* the Crawford of her early revue days. She has explained that one of the reasons she failed with Sadie Thompson in *Rain* was that she could never at that point have fathomed what Sadie was like inside. Such mishaps have been rare, because Crawford has most always portrayed women whose emotions and motivations were somewhat akin to her own, so that when the character emerges on the screen the barriers between actress and role dissolve as the two merge into one. Whether the audience believes a word the character says is almost irrelevant, and certainly in terms of some of the glossier Crawford product, practically impossible. What counts is that however florid the dialogue or academic the dramatic conflict, Crawford seems to believe

passionately in every word, and that is enough.

At times her perennial earnestness has proved to be a handicap; it has prevented her from developing into a really accomplished light comedienne, for one thing, as well as depriving her of the sense of irony that some actors use to prevent the blame for second-rate material from falling onto their shoulders. Yet Crawford's inability to condescend to even the most unrewarding of scripts does constitute a peculiar sort of integrity, and one that audiences recognized and respected.

As a result Crawford has often been criticized for submitting so often to projects that seemed to exist solely for her to rise above. Most of her films admittedly have been vehicles drawn to her established measurements rather than roles expansive enough for her to grow into. Certainly the embittered semi-freak of *A Woman's Face* and the jealous neurotic of the 1947 *Possessed* give tantalizing glimpses of an artist's range far wider than the polish of the star turns that were the mainstay of her career. Yet even here Crawford's unusual receptivity to her followers sustained her. There was a plethora of capable character actresses in the movies, but only one Crawford, and uniqueness was always more valuable to a long career than mere virtuosity. Roles like Anna Holm and Louise Howell were useful every so often to remind the critics and herself how versatile she could be when she wanted to. However, such performances tended to foster admiration rather than adulation, and it was the latter that Crawford was really after all along. Crawford's real vocation has always been stardom, and acting the means to fulfilling that end.

Barbara Stanwyck, the star whose career most closely parallels Crawford's, is reported to have said, "I want to go on acting until they have to shoot me." Extreme as it sounds, this is a sentiment that Crawford shares in full measure. As long as she can manage to ambulate to the set under her own power, Crawford will probably continue to give the grandchildren of her original fans object lessons in the *modus operandi* of movie stardom at its most exalted. No doubt they will find her just as enthralling as did their forebears. After all, she has had nearly fifty years to refine the role of Joan Crawford, her greatest characterization, down to the smallest particular.

APPRENTICESHIP TO STARDOM

In the days when studio publicity flacks labored overtime to push Roosevelt and Dillinger off the front pages to make way for the latest doings of film folk under contract, one of the most recurrent sagas in the daily tabloids and monthly fan magazines was the inspiring history of the Rise of Joan Crawford. Her official life story was refined, rephrased, and regurgitated so many times that to the ravenously curious fans of the thirties it was raised to the level of a folk legend. No matter how blithely small details of this account were changed the dimensions of this fable remained of Dickensian proportions. One must assume that at least the essential facts are largely true, since no alternative versions of her early life ever reached print.

Basically it seems that she was born Lucille Fay Le Sueur in San Antonio, Texas, on March 23, 1908 (or 1906 or 1904, depending on which report is to be believed). While Lucille, nicknamed Billie, was still an infant, her mother divorced her father and married a Mr. Henry Cassin. Lucille and her older brother Hal spent their early years in Lawton, Oklahoma, where her stepfather ran a small vaudeville house and became entangled in some dubious business transactions. Later the family moved to a shabby hotel in Kansas City whereupon Cassin deserted his acquired brood. Mrs. Cassin was to have no better luck with her third husband, acquired a few years later, who apparently showed more than a paternal interest in the teen-aged Lucille. Meanwhile Mrs. Cassin supported her two children by toiling in a laundry, and rooming in quarters behind the store.

Aspiring for a less tawdry life for her daughter, she enrolled Lucille first at St. Agnes' Academy and then the Rockingham School in the Midwest, where the girl performed menial tasks for her keep. What with scrubbing floors and enduring the snubs of the paying students and the beatings of her superiors, she had little time to spend on her studies. This left her ill-prepared for the next step on the ladder of her education, Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri. There she spent one abortive semester trying to compete with girls who had spent their childhoods in classrooms rather than behind the back stairs. However, the experience was not a complete loss, for it was at Stephens that she found her first mentor and her first beau. The former was "Daddy" Wood, president of the

With her mother, at age nine.

college, who became something of a surrogate father to the insecure adolescent and inculcated in her the values of persistence and hard work toward the pursuit of adult goals. The second was a young blade named Ray Sterling, who offered her a first intoxicating taste of romance and sophistication.

After her academic debacle, Lucille returned to Kansas City and a job behind a counter in a department store. She considered this just a temporary expedient to keep the family above water financially. She had already decided that her future lay with the stage rather than behind the ladies' notions counter, having made her plans back in the days spent gaping backstage at the vaudevillians playing in her stepfather's theater. She won her first career break with a place in the chorus of a tacky itinerant revue for a brief stint. After the tour ended she trekked to Chicago

and landed another chorus spot in a night club, which led to others throughout the Midwest. While working a club in Detroit, she caught the eye of Broadway mogul J.J. Shubert, supposedly by knocking a drink into his lap during her routine. His response was to offer a place in the line of his Broadway-bound musical, *Innocent Eyes*, which featured the legendary French music-hall star, Mistinguett.

Certain that she was finally breaking away from the squalor of her childhood and into the big time, she spent her evenings kicking in the back row of the chorus and moonlighting after hours singing and dancing in Harry Richman's speakeasy. It was then, in December of 1924, that MGM executive Harry Rapf is supposed to have spotted Lucille in the chorus and offered her a screen test. (A somewhat more plausible version of this incident relates that a man named Nils Granlund, who had found her the after-hours job, was a friend of Rapf's and recommended her sight unseen for the test.) Years later Crawford was to express amazement that any movie studio should ever have shown any interest in her at all; at that stage her ambitions and aptitude pointed to a career cavorting in musical comedy. Nevertheless she soon received the fateful telegram offering her a six-month contract with Metro, at seventy-five dollars a week—more than twice her weekly salary as a Broadway chorine. This lavish stipend, more than anything else, induced her to accept the offer. She arrived in Los Angeles in January of 1925 expecting a phalanx of reporters, movie executives, and beribboned children bearing floral greetings to her train. Instead she found one lone office boy from the publicity department, who in turn was somewhat dismayed to find a chubby and befreckled teenager in place of the languorous Ziegfeldian showgirl he had been prompted to expect.

This served as the first ominous hint that the august powers of MGM had more significant matters to ponder than a whirlwind buildup for their newest employee. However, if casting had yet to find a niche for her, the publicity department pulled up the slack. During her second set of screen tests at the studio, she caught the interest of cameraman John Arnold, who told her his viewfinder captured a girl with vitality and distinctive bone structure. The bone structure was ignored for the moment, but the vitality was tested in an endless series of cheesecake displays designed to brighten the pages of tabloids and the movie magazines. She appeared bedecked in pirate garb, as a silk-stockinged Santa Claus, a

A Twenties portrait.

T-shirted sprinter, and, most fetchingly of all, as the begrimed Miss Fourth of July catapulted from a stack of firecrackers.

Her first actual screen appearance was inauspicious indeed. Norma Shearer had a dual role in a film called *Lady For a Night*, and Crawford was drafted as her double for those scenes in which both characters were to occupy the screen simultaneously. This was followed by a short film trailer displaying the forthcoming year's product to theater owners. In this effort she was cast as Miss MGM, appearing at the beginning of the film to introduce the various film clips. Obviously Lucille was beginning to attract some notice around the studio, but she had yet to be introduced to the movie public. That opportunity came, albeit briefly, with a comic trifle entitled *Pretty Ladies* (1925). A loosely veiled depiction of the backstage milieu of the Ziegfeld Follies, the film featured ZaSu Pitts as a prankish ugly duckling, Tom Moore as the object of her affections, and Lilyan Tashman as Pitts' vampish rival. Crawford, still billed as Lucille Le Sueur, was cast logically enough in a bit as a chorus beauty.

This negligible debut led to an appearance in a trifle called *The Only Thing* (1925). This was an indigestible morsel scripted by Elinor Glyn, whose pretentiously fervid romances benighted the silent screen for nearly a decade. *The Only Thing* typically features a lovely princess engaged to a repulsive king for reasons of state but enamored of a dapper duke for reasons of her own. Conrad Nagel and the gifted Eleanor Boardman were burdened with the lead roles, while Crawford was practically invisible as a member of the court.

Her first role of any significance came when she successfully tested against 150 others for a supporting role in a Jackie Coogan vehicle entitled *Old Clothes* (1925). Like most of the later Coogan pictures, this was a rather threadbare rehash of Chaplin's *The Kid*, made on a small budget in the wake of Coogan's diminishing hold on the public. Crawford appears as a confidant of Coogan's and to provide a dash of love interest in a subplot involving her and Alan Forrest. Although a secondary part in a third-rate movie, this gave Crawford her first chance to be really noticed by the critics and the public, and reassured her that her days as a glorified extra were finally behind her.

Despite her clear progress at Metro, at this stage Crawford's reputation around town centered about her off-screen exploits rather than her achievements on the lot. Although the likes of Lillian Gish were yet to tremble from the new

OLD CLOTHES (1925). With Jackie Coogan and Alan Forrest.

SALLY, IRENE AND MARY (1925). With Constance Bennett and Sally O'Neil.

acting competition, Crawford felt that at least she could challenge all comers for the title of Hollywood's Princess of Hot-cha. Finding her energies insufficiently taxed at the studio during the day, Crawford spent her evenings blackbottoming her blues away at the brightest movie colony niteries, winning herself a mantelful of trophies, inanimate and otherwise, in the process. Such antics even served to further her film career, for it was during one of these after-hours dancing sprees that director Edmund Goulding took note of her and requested her for one of the leads in the forthcoming *Sally, Irene and Mary* (1925).

This represented a real step forward for Crawford, as the film in question was a major production based on a recent Broadway musical hit, and had already been cast with such promising star material as Constance Bennett, Sally O'Neil, and William Haines. The prototype for dozens of subsequent fables of the tawdry lives of Times Square showgirls, *Sally, Irene and Mary* focuses on the tangled loves of a haughty golddigger (Bennett), a pert, no-nonsense colleen (O'Neil), and an idealistic naif (Crawford) who falls for a cad and ends up with a coffin for her reward. Crawford has the least footage of the three and makes Irene a pretty and demure creature, if hardly the poignant figure of tragedy intended. Her high spot is a frantic Charleston performed amid the muted spectacle of the film's biggest production number.

While *Sally, Irene and Mary* was still in production, Crawford's original contract had been renewed at a slight increase in salary. More importantly, it was then that Metro's publicity department decided that something had to be done about that impossible name of hers. Lucille Le Sueur was deemed both pretentious and unpronounceable, and the solution the studio devised was both practical and good publicity. A contest to rename the girl was announced in a fan outlet called *Movie Weekly*, with a $500 prize offered to the winning entry. For about a week Lucille tried Joan Arden, the prizewinning choice, on for size, until a bit player with the same name was discovered working on the lot. It was only then that the second-place alternative of Joan Crawford was settled on her. The ex-Miss Le Sueur actively disliked the name at first, and for years was Jo-Ann to acquaintances and plain Billie to husbands and close friends. It stuck nevertheless, and her billing was changed accordingly on *Old Clothes* and *The Only Thing*, which had yet to be released.

Her next few roles somewhat dissipated the gains she had made

TRAMP, TRAMP, TRAMP (1926). With Harry Langdon.

with *Sally, Irene and Mary*. Her subsequent assignment was a colorless role in *The Boob* (1926), a programmer featuring Gertrude Olmstead and George K. Arthur, a moderately popular comedian of the day. Arthur played a quixotic ne'er-do-well, Olmstead his heartthrob, and Crawford a Prohibition agent, of all things. The director of this quickie was a tyro named William Wellman, who went on to bigger things the following year with *Wings*. *The Boob* was merely a forgettable episode for everyone concerned.

Crawford followed this with a loan-out assignment to First National opposite Harry Langdon in his first full-length comedy, *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1926). This wasn't a very encouraging sign, as players considered really valuable were rarely released for work at other studios, and Crawford approached the film with reluctance. Ironically, *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* is today probably the best known of her silent films prior to *Our Dancing Daughters*, though for reasons that have nothing to do with her contribution to it. Thanks to the success of the film and a handful that followed, Langdon briefly reached the pantheon of great silent-film comedians before sinking back into two-reelers and supporting roles. His screen personality was that of the witless, overgrown child who is totally incapable of coping with a

PARIS (1926). With Charles Ray.

world populated with humans more complex than he—which meant absolutely everyone. His greatest assets were a dumfounded, unfocused stare and an air of sweet bewilderment at every situation that threatened him. *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* presented this character as a hapless contestant in a cross-country walking marathon, which he enters to save his father's business from ruin and to win the admiration of Crawford, the daughter of the shoe magnate sponsoring the contest.

Crawford's role in *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, is limited to providing the customary romantic foil to the star comedian, and her footage is accordingly brief. She is costumed and made up in the usual twenties ingenue fashion, complete with bee-stung lips, shingled hair, and a cloche hat which almost entirely hides her face except in her few close-ups. At this early stage, Crawford displays little of the vivacity that was soon to characterize her performances. She still had a lot to learn about movie professionalism at this point as well. Frank Capra, a Langdon gagwriter at the time, later recalled that director Harry Edwards had to reshoot one particular scene several times as Crawford spoiled take

after take by exploding with mirth at Langdon's antics.

She then returned to Metro for *Paris* (1926), which was a minor milestone in her early career. This effort gave Crawford her first really meaty role in films and provided the dim outline of the vibrant Crawford personality that was to emerge fully within a few brief years. The plot dealt with a young American millionaire's infatuation with an uninhibited apache dancer, who in turn hopelessly adores her worthless dancing partner. The nominal star was Charles Ray, whose long-past vogue had been based on a series of bucolic romances; he was now trying to reestablish himself with more sophisticated roles. However, it was Crawford who grabbed most of the attention. The Girl in *Paris* had to be fiery and sensual, and for the first time Crawford on screen conveyed the hedonistic abandon she had always displayed on the dance floor in night clubs. Although the critics expressed lofty disdain for the trashy material that surrounded Crawford, most of them were very impressed by the work of an actress whose previous performances had been ordinary at most.

Now Crawford was clearly on her way. While *Paris* was in production she was named as one of the Wampus Baby Stars for 1926, along with Mary Astor, Janet Gaynor, Dolores Del Rio, Fay Wray, Dolores Costello, and seven others who never quite attained the peak of stardom. Furthermore, Crawford's next vehicle, modest as it was, measured snugly to her blossoming abilities. In *The Taxi Dancer* (1927), she played a Dixie rosebud with dancing aspirations who journeys to New York and dallies with amoral big-city types until she comes to her senses and returns home with an honest man in tow. In a pattern that became increasingly rigid in subsequent films, Crawford's character is that of a basically moral girl who spends most of her energies wavering between the provocative roué who excites her passions and the stalwart juvenile who truly loves her. Burdened once more with a clichéd script and mediocre direction by Harry Millarde, Crawford occasionally lapsed into the posing and grimacing characteristic of the worst silent screen acting. Yet there was no denying her infectious liveliness.

Even *The Taxi Dancer* was a dramatic tour de force compared to *Winners of the Wilderness* (1927), which followed soon after. This incredibly tedious effort featured MGM's Western star, Colonel Tim McCoy, as an Anglo-American colonel in the French and Indian War, and Crawford, buried under Marie Antoinetteish gowns and powdered wigs, as the daughter of his French

WINNERS OF THE WILDERNESS (1927). With Tim McCoy.

adversary. Inevitably, they get hopelessly moonstruck over each other. The pace is laggard and the production values cheap, relying largely on obvious painted backdrops for ambience.

Fortunately, Crawford was kept so busy during her early years at Metro that even a fiasco like *Winners of the Wilderness* barely stayed her momentum. *The Understanding Heart* (1927) was a slight improvement, although still irredeemably low-grade material. In this one Crawford has the bizarre central role of a vigilant fire guard for the Forest Rangers. She is pursued simultaneously by Francis X. Bushman, Jr., as a manly Ranger and Rockcliffe Fellowes, a fugitive from justice and an unfair murder rap. However, a climactic forest fire and the film's spectacular Yosemite locales stole the dramatic thunder from Crawford and her co-players.

Nevertheless, her professionalism even in such quickies as these caught the attention of such eminent studio personages as Paul Bern and even L. B. Mayer himself. Judging that she was ready for more prestigious projects, the powers at Metro next assigned her to co-star with Lon Chaney in *The Unknown* (1927), directed by that specialist in the grotesque, Tod Browning. At that time Chaney was the studio's most valuable box-office property as well as the preeminent actor on the lot, and his pictures were always

accorded the most lavish mountings and carefully crafted scripts to showcase his talents. On the set, Chaney astounded the young actress with his monastic dedication to his work. Since her arrival in Hollywood, Crawford had always been intensely curious regarding the secrets of those who had reached the movie summits, and she later claimed Chaney gave her an invaluable lesson in the art of concentration.

Chaney's efforts usually featured gruesome characters in psychologically tortuous situations, but the kinkiness of *The Unknown* outdid them all. Chaney plays the supposedly armless wonder of a Spanish circus, who is enamored of Crawford, his assistant. His seeming affliction is what attracts her to Chaney, for she has a pathological aversion to men's hands. In order to cement their relationship Chaney has his arms amputated; heretofore he had merely strapped them undetectably to his sides. He returns from the operation only to find Crawford in the arms of the circus muscleman, who has cured the girl of her odd quirk.

THE UNKNOWN (1927). With Lon Chaney.

Naturally, most of the attention accorded *The Unknown* was focused on Chaney, but Crawford acquitted herself well and the critics responded with favor. Although she was still frequently likened in appearance and technique to Gloria Swanson, her personality was becoming more distinctive with each successive film.

Having held her own with Lon Chaney, Crawford was next assigned to perform opposite John Gilbert, MGM's top male screen idol. The experience proved less fulfilling for Crawford than the weeks spent under Chaney's tutelage, as Gilbert was apparently too engrossed in his pursuit of Garbo to pay much attention to the task at hand. The result was *Twelve Miles Out* (1927), a rousing action picture showcasing Gilbert as a devil-may-care rum runner who first menaces and then romances brittle socialite Crawford, before dying predictably for his accumulated sins. In all, it was a typically well-tooled mounting for the exuberant Gilbert personality. Although Crawford is on hand only as the essential feminine vis-à-vis for the masculine star, it did no rising actress any harm to be paired with the adored Gilbert. As befit the new leading lady of the nation's heartthrob, great care was taken to make her as lovely as possible. The result-

TWELVE MILES OUT (1927). With John Gilbert and Ernest Torrence.

ing transformation since *The Understanding Heart* only a few months before was truly startling. Sleekly gowned and coiffed with a striking mannish bob, Crawford was beginning to shed her fleshy adolescent cuteness and emerge as a stunningly attractive young woman.

Crawford was next cast in tandem with William Haines, who had risen fast since *Sally, Irene and Mary*. Haines was as brashly likable offscreen as on, and he struck up an immediate friendship with Crawford that has endured to this day. The two films they made in succession were amiable trifles, the sort of slick program fodder Metro turned out effortlessly week after week. The first, *Spring Fever* (1927), placed Haines as an ambitious young golfer eager to turn pro, while *West Point* (1928), presented him as a cadet whose prowess at football is matched only by his outsized ego. In both films Crawford is bedecked in picture hats and chiffon and instructed to exude feminine allure and nothing more.

By the end of 1927, Crawford was clearly marked for imminent stardom at the studio. *Variety* prophetically reported in its year-end issue: "She looks like a leader during the coming year, and is being pushed toward stardom." However, the frantic pace of her career failed to dampen her flamboyance offscreen; she still expended as much effort bolstering her reputation as Hollywood's leading exponent of flaming youth as she did refining her cinematic skills. She changed her hair color weekly, danced in fringed skirts shorter than anyone else dared, and generally cavorted about town with a host of handsome escorts.

However, all this was to change when she was introduced to Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., late in 1927. Unlike her previous beaux, this one had undeniable class and refinement. Apart from his natural intelligence and charm, he was the scion of the royal family of Hollywood, which ruled the upper crust of movie society with a hauteur more appropriate to the imperial court of old Russia. The romance of Young Doug and Joan, popularly referred to as the Prince and Cinderella, was rivaled for press coverage only by the upcoming presidential campaign, to the delight of Crawford's ever-increasing following and the horror of Fairbanks' parents.

Sensing the abhorrence of Doug, Sr., and Little Mary to all that vulgar publicity, Crawford realized she had to acquire a more dignified public image in a hurry. Hence a profusion of articles began to appear to the effect that "The hey-hey girl has become demure," capitalizing on her overnight transformation from jazz baby to decorous fiancée.

Meanwhile there was still her

With husband Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.

screen work to attend to; Crawford's desire to maintain her career on its upward curve was if anything whetted by her romantic battle for social respectability. After her successful twin appearances with Haines, Crawford replaced Renée Adorée in the trouble-ridden silent production of the fabulously successful operetta *Rose Marie* (1928). Stripped of its syrupy score, the property was revealed as a banal melodrama of passion, homicide, and adventure in the Canadian wilds. The title role gave Crawford the chance to alternate between sugary coyness and feline sensuality with alarming frequency. Rose Marie was a stubbornly superficial girl, clearly ill-suited to Crawford's direct, contemporary style. On the plus side were the striking use of Yosemite location footage and the direction of Lucien Hubbard but all the same the critics were unimpressed.

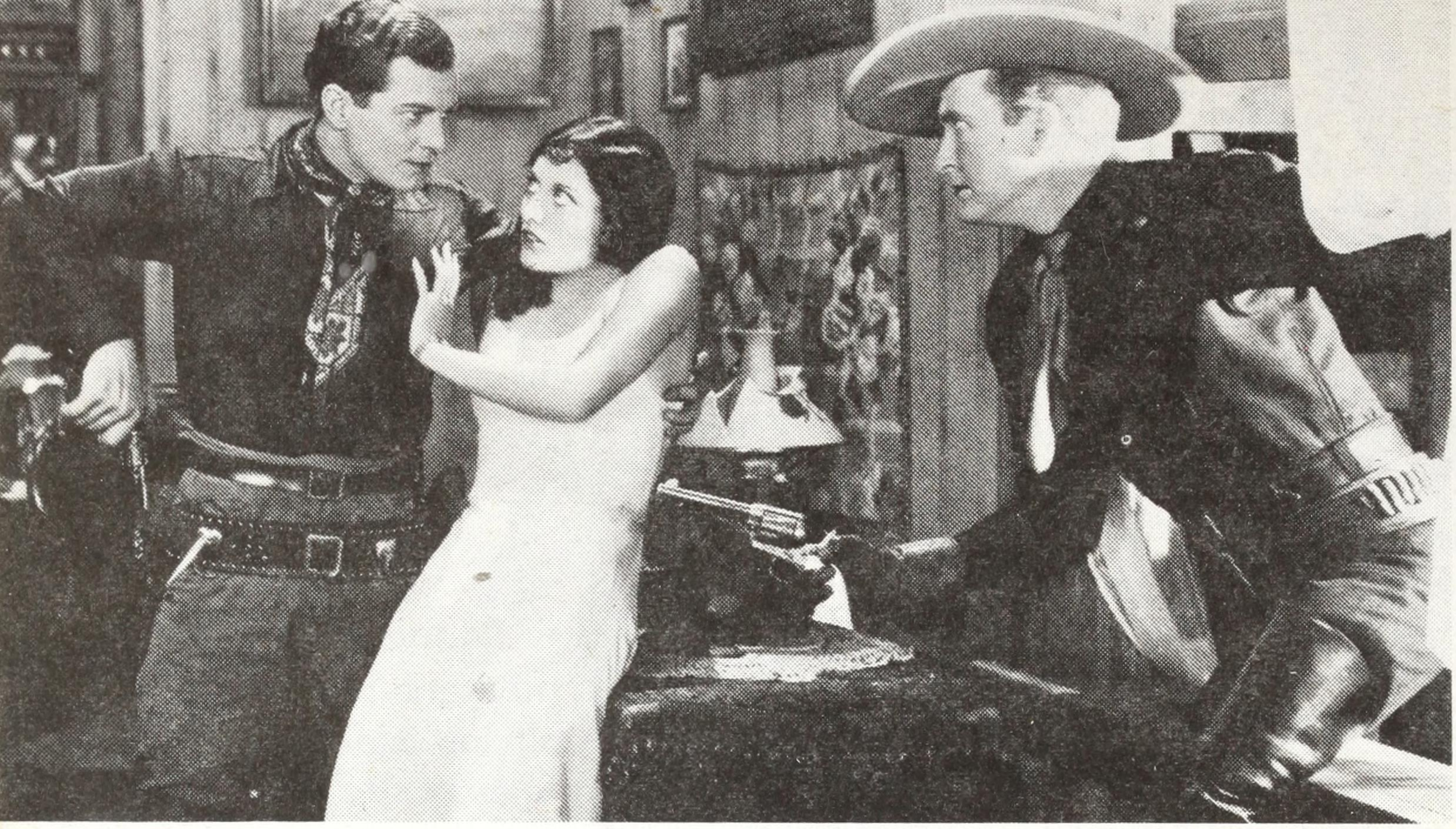
By now it was a foregone conclusion that Crawford would eventually be featured opposite Metro's

entry in the Latin-lover sweepstakes, Ramon Novarro—she had already taken her turn with every other male star on the lot. The excuse for this inevitable casting ploy was a film version of Ben Ames Williams' novel, *All the Brothers Were Valiant*, a nineteenth-century nautical epic. Spiced with ship mutinies, crafty Oriental opium smugglings, sea squalls, and alcoholic debauches, *Across to Singapore* (1928) boils down to a triangular romance between Novarro, Crawford, and Ernest Torrence.

By 1928 scribes and fans were sufficiently aware of her potential to chafe at the undemanding assignments she kept getting, for all the supposedly grandiose plans Metro had mapped out for her. The studio's response was to harness her once more into an obscure sagebrusher opposite Tim McCoy, entitled *The Law of the Range* (1928). The only virtue to this one was that practically no one saw it. It wasn't released in New York until after the tumultuous première of *Our Dancing Daughters*, and even then was relegated to double bills in neighborhood theaters before sinking into the oblivion it deserved.

In recompense she was teamed once again with Gilbert in *Four Walls* (1928). Crawford's very contemporary brusqueness gave a unique sort of chemistry to the scripts linking her and this co-star. Whereas the Garbo-Gilbert vehi-

ROSE MARIE (1928). With House Peters and James Murray.



THE LAW OF THE RANGE (1928). With Rex Lease and Tim McCoy.

cles tended to be soft-focus paeans to sexual arousal in exotic climes, the two Crawford-Gilbert efforts were lurid, down-to-earth melodramas which substituted bathtub hooch for champagne. *Four Walls* told a familiar tale of rival gangsters (Gilbert and Louis Natheaux) feuding for the affections of the tough, amoral moll (Crawford). Its greatest asset was that the role of the coarse and fickle Frieda required Crawford to be anything but dainty, and she met the challenge head-on. Her hair curled and lightened, and her frocks spangly and provocative, Crawford cavorts, imbibes, and seduces her male quarry with an intensity which was less than subtle but undeniably riveting. She even managed the considerable feat of steering the critics' attention away from Gilbert in a Gilbert vehicle —an accomplishment heretofore managed only by Garbo and Lillian Gish.

The lesson was not lost on the powers at the studio, and the opportunity she had awaited for three years was finally in view. A script was prepared by Josephine Lovett tailored expressly to suit Crawford's personality, really for the first time in her career. The outcome of this was *Our Dancing Daughters*, which opened at the Capitol in New York in October, 1928, broke every existing record at the theater, and proceeded to duplicate the feat throughout the country. The plot was hardly innovative, even then —it was really just *Sally, Irene and Mary* among the Four Hundred. What made the film remarkable was its accuracy in summing up and then glamorizing the attitudes of an

OUR DANCING DAUGHTERS (1928). As Diana.

era, achieving the sort of impact *The Graduate* had four decades later. The flappers and sheiks of the twenties, weaned on Fitzgerald and John Held, fervently believed in living freely and fully before the responsiblities of adulthood descended, and *Our Dancing Daughters* flaunted the banner of hedonism as if it were a standard of battle. Premarital sex, of course, remained taboo but all other excesses were not only tolerated but encouraged.

The story centers around three young California socialites. Anne (Anita Page) is a calculating golddigger who masks her perennial drunkenness and promiscuity under a blandly puritanical façade. Bea (Dorothy Sebastian) is a good-hearted and steadfast girl whose future is clouded by the memory of a single sexual indiscretion in her past. "Dangerous Diana" (Crawford) is something else entirely. An irrepressible, fun-loving creature, she matches snappy patter with her parents, flirts vivaciously with dozens of infatuated youths, and positively vibrates to the infectious jazz rhythms of the age. Her joyous capers earn her an unjustly scandalous reputation, as she is fundamentally a forthright and moral girl who reserves her true affections for the one right man who has yet to come along. The ideal beau arrives in the guise of Ben (Johnny Mack Brown), who thinks Diana is promiscuous and consequently succumbs to the coy wiles of the wide-eyed Anne. Ben and Anne marry, bringing the joys of ermine and champagne to Anne and heaps of sorrow to her husband and Diana. Only when the scheming and paranoid Anne drunkenly tumbles down a staircase to her well-deserved end are Ben and Diana rapturously reunited.

Even the most banal of the film's plot devices seem fresh when touched by Crawford's irresistible vivacity. She is first seen dancing madly before a three-way mirror, and for the next eight reels she never stands still for a minute. Her credo is simple: as she explains to her swain during their passionate tryst on the beach, "I want to hold out my hands and catch [life]—like the sunlight." Crawford's renowned Charleston is performed in a half slip and fringed blouse; a skirt would have been too confining. She is not really particularly graceful or agile, but she has the abandoned intensity of a pent-up animal who has tasted freedom for the first time. Diana is a triumph of personality over technique, for at this stage Crawford's skills have yet to be tempered by restraint. Her mannerisms at times tend to the overly antic, as her shoulders gyrate, head shakes, and eyes roll to the ever-present syncopation of her spirit. However, her presence is open and invigorating to

DREAM OF LOVE (1928). With Nils Asther.

a degree unmatched by any of the other star flappers of the period. She gives the impression of seeming totally free of emotional artifice —her joy looks real rather than conjured for the camera.

The impact of *Our Dancing Daughters* on its audiences was equaled only by Diana's influence over Crawford's subsequent characterizations. For the next decade, descendants of this hedonistic but principled creature surfaced again and again, although languid thirties chic came to replace her pre-Depression exuberance. Until *Mildred Pierce* presented her with a fresh archetype, for much of her following she was to remain the Dancing Daughter, no matter how hard

OUR MODERN MAIDENS (1929). With Rod La Rocque.

she tried to vary the pattern.

Our Dancing Daughters' extraordinary popularity led to a doubling of Crawford's salary to five hundred dollars a week, but as yet failed to guarantee her the kind of parts that sustain a star career. Against her will Crawford next reverted from tinseled frocks to flowered dirndls for six reels of Elinor Glynnish claptrap entitled *Dream of Love.* Very loosely based on the nineteenth-century play *Adrienne Lecouvreur,* this film forced Crawford to finger a gypsy guitar and moon over a fickle prince, whom she finally bewitches. Ruritanian revels were never her métier; besides, the film was slanted to persuade the fans that Crawford's smouldering leading man Nils Asther was major star material. *Dream of Love* did nothing for either one of them.

The Duke Steps Out (1929), found her once more melting to William Haines' effervescent good spirits. She played a collegiate sort and he a promising pugilist, having mastered golf and football in previous outings. Their offscreen friendship and the groundwork laid by *West Point* and *Spring Fever* led to smooth teamwork between Crawford and Haines, and the film proved extremely popular. Only Crawford and a few discerning critics seemed to care that she was again relegated to basking on the edge of Haines' spotlight.

Trusting in the obscure wisdom of the studio's notions of casting its future stars, Crawford almost always cooperated with Metro's dic-

tums in the hope that her slightly truculent obedience would be rewarded. As usual her career instincts bore her out; her next film was to be a follow-up to *Our Dancing Daughters*, and she was further promised star billing and the salary and prestige that accompanied it. She was the last player officially raised to stardom in a silent picture, thus presiding over the end of an epoch in movies while anxiously preparing to usher in a new one.

The occasion for this event was an unpretentious opus called *Our Modern Maidens* (1929), which capitalized on Crawford's publicized romance with co-star Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., as well as the success of *Our Dancing Daughters*. Rather more turgid in tone than its predecessor, it emphasized the mismated amours of its characters over their youthful skylarks. Once more Crawford is a leader of post-deb society, and Anita Page, the one other principal retained from *Our Dancing Daughters*, is a piquant Southern pal of Joan's with the quaint name of Kentucky. Their affairs with Fairbanks and Rod La Rocque become progressively tangled, but after a series of misunderstandings, illicit pregnancies, and annulments ensue, the likely couples are appropriately united in the final reel.

The script and direction are rather hackneyed and Crawford is overemphatic throughout, but it hardly mattered. All the fans knew was that she alternated her sieges of injured suffering with semi-clad dance routines in her celebrated style, and that was sufficient. Although talkies were firmly entrenched by the time *Our Modern Maidens* was released, it found a large and eager public.

Yet undeniably the handwriting was on the wall. Even *Our Dancing Daughters* had been exhibited with recorded sound effects the year before, and by now Crawford was the only female star at the studio save Garbo who had not yet risked her future with a talking debut. The success or failure of such an undertaking would determine whether Crawford would be classed as a temporary whim of the fans, thanks to one sure-fire role, or a durable personality in her own right. This was the first crucial test of Crawford's adaptability and determination to stay at the top, and the outcome was emphatically up to her.

FROM FLAPPER TO FASHION PLATE

Audiences first heard Crawford speak in an extended filmed vaudeville show entitled *Hollywood Revue of 1929*, which was road-shown just before the release of *Our Modern Maidens*. In the first months of the talkie tidal wave, musicals were the mania at all the studios, and each competed with the other in gilding the lily with all-star casts of dramatic performers trying to prove they could croon and hoof as well as emote. *Hollywood Revue* was MGM's answer to *Paramount On Parade*, the Fox *Movietone Follies* and Warners' *The Show of Shows*, and most every star on the lot save Novarro and the recalcitrant Garbo submitted to the ordeal. The film was quickly and crudely made, and staged with the imagination of an antediluvian *Ed Sullivan Show*, only at twice the length. Crawford's contribution was a pleasant if unexceptional song and dance to "Got a Feeling for You," which at least proved she had no fatal vocal handicaps.

The real gamble came with *Untamed* (1929), her dramatic sound debut. As soon as she read the script, Crawford must have foreseen that only her most blinding display of pyrotechnics could salvage this one. Shearer and Garbo were introduced to talkies with literate adaptations of proven theatrical successes; Crawford had to grapple with an incredible creature named Bingo, raised in a godforsaken jungle and transformed from spitfire to debutante when her guardians transplant her in Manhattan. The demented plot includes one unforgettable episode in which Crawford reawakens the love of her hesitant society boyfriend by shooting him in the arm—thus bringing him to his senses. *Untamed* was further marred by static camera work and direction, the rule rather than the exception during the early adjustment of movies to cumbersome sound equipment. Joan also got to warble a few songs, including one remarkable air entitled "The Chant of the Jungle," performed before a backdrop of obviously phony sound-stage flora and fauna. *Untamed* received deservedly atrocious notices, but audiences were pleased to note that Crawford's speaking voice was sonorous and expressive, and that the microphone had failed to inhibit her customary liveliness. They also liked the work of her youthful costar Robert Montgomery, a recent import from Broadway.

Just before *Untamed* was released, Crawford and Fairbanks were quietly married at last, stifling

HOLLYWOOD REVUE OF 1929 (1929). The "Singin' in the Rain" finale. Crawford in bottom row, second from the right.

UNTAMED (1929). With Gertrude Astor and Robert Montgomery.

MONTANA MOON (1930). With Johnny Mack Brown and Ricardo Cortez.

the persistent rumors that they had been secretly wed since 1928. From the nuptials on, *Photoplay* and the like unleashed a barrage of syrupy interviews with the blissful couple, usually conducted in their little Spanish cottage while Crawford busily crocheted little "whatnots" for her beloved "Dodo." Sophisticates gagged but her fans, predictably, were entranced.

In a telegram announcing their wedding to the studio, Crawford wired, "If I have worked hard in the past watch me now." Metro took her at her word and as a perverse wedding present next assigned her to breathe life into *Montana Moon* (1930). Here she found herself impersonating a headstrong socialite, who flirts with sinuous Ricardo Cortez before discovering true love in the Big Sky Country with Johnny Mack Brown. The film's only distinction was in displaying a Crawford who was more arrestingly beautiful with each successive vehicle. Realizing that the waning vogue for energetic flappers would soon catch up with her, she reshaped her face and figure to anticipate the demand for a more cosmopolitan look. After drastic dieting and extensive dental work, she achieved the hollowed cheeks and chiseled jawline that became her distinctive trademark. Contrary to contemporary fashion, she widened her mouth and thickened her eyebrows and the ploy worked—shortly she became the most influential style-setter since Garbo.

However, it seemed that the more beautiful Crawford became, the shoddier were the scenarios she was destined to play. A second rehash of *Our Dancing Daughters* next lay in store, reuniting her with Dorothy Sebastian, Anita Page, and director Harry Beaumont. By logical extension, the girls are now *Our Blushing Brides* (1930), but this time a touch of the post-Black Friday social realities have intruded into the proceedings. Reflecting the recent Wall Street debacle, the three cronies have been demoted from the social pages to the want ads, and pursue their romantic aspirations while toiling over a hot lingerie counter every day. Carousing and loose living are left to Page and Sebastian in this one—Crawford is level-headed and moral, holding out until the real thing comes along. Naturally it does, in the person of Robert Montgomery. As usual, the reviewers were churlish, but at the end of the year *Variety* reported that *Our Blushing Brides* was one of the half-dozen highest-grossing pictures of the year.

Crawford's next, however, was too wretched even to pass muster with the executives at Metro. Deaf to her pleas for more substantial stories, the studio shackled her to the ingenue lead in the projected film version of Vincent Youmans' musical *Great Day*, which hadn't even been terribly popular on the stage. After a few weeks' shooting,

OUR BLUSHING BRIDES (1930). With Raymond Hackett and Robert Montgomery.

DANCE, FOOLS, DANCE (1931). With Lester Vail.

PAID (1930). With John Miljan and Douglass Montgomery.

the rushes were so patently awful that the footage was shelved and the picture never completed.

It was something of a backhanded compliment to Crawford's popularity and talent that the studio felt it unnecessary to provide her with challenging roles in more ambitious projects. The public thronged to see her no matter what tripe she was given to perform; hence they reasoned it wasn't worth bothering to try and improve things. All Crawford knew was that Garbo and Shearer got to act in O'Neill while she was left with Bess Meredyth. She also realized that no matter how devoted her public was, even they would soon tire of her if her stories continued to atrophy at their present pace.

Luckily, at this point Metro relented and tossed her the best dramatic opportunity she had ever had. *Paid* (1930) was a new film version of the melodrama *Within the Law*, which Jane Cowl had popularized on Broadway nearly twenty years before. It had been filmed twice before with Alice Joyce and Norma Talmadge in the leads, and typically was prepared this time around with Norma Shearer in mind. Shearer was pregnant with the Thalberg heir, however, so the role fell into Crawford's eager grasp instead. The part of Mary Turner presented her with emotional challenges far more vital than the usual toss-up between Ricardo Cortez and Johnny Mack Brown for her affections. This character is a young and embittered dupe sent up the river for a crime she didn't commit, who, when paroled, vows to wreak vengeance on those responsible for placing her behind bars. First she hatches a devious scheme for parting well-heeled lechers from their lucre, and then graduates to the conquest of the son of the district attorney who cinched her conviction. Her plan falters when she finds herself falling for the young man, and in the end she resolves to bury the past and build for the future on a more honorable footing.

Although the plot remained a bit mechanical, Charles MacArthur's updated dialogue made the situations and Mary Turner herself surprisingly fresh and genuine to contemporary audiences. However, the real force behind the film's impact was Crawford herself. Always most impressive playing unfortunate women whose determination to survive masked their emotional wounds, she forged something vivid and chilling out of Mary Turner. In the early sequences dealing with her incarceration, she conveyed the pinched, gaunt air of one who must restrain every muscle from wreaking havoc on those who have dealt her such a crooked hand. This barely suppressed sense of rage finds its outlet through Crawford's

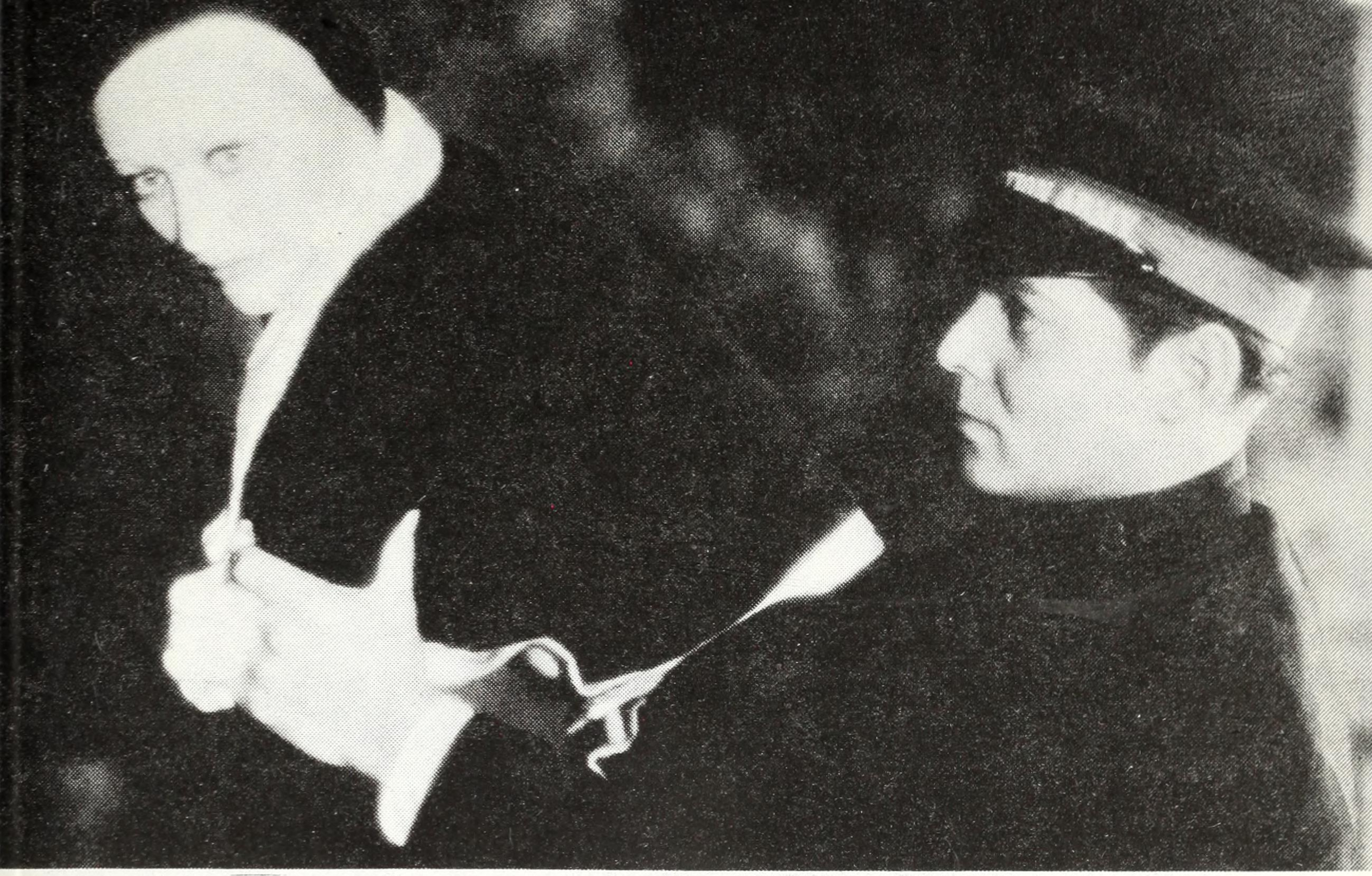
amazingly expressive eyes, which have never before seemed as huge and hypnotic.

The significance of *Paid* to the studio was that they had a new prototype on which to pattern future Crawford vehicles. For the next few years, many of her roles were permutations of Mary: women impoverished and trapped in unsavory milieus from which they constantly struggled to free themselves. Also like Mary, these offspring tended to become involved initially with the wrong men or the right ones for the wrong reasons, such as desperation, innocence or obligation.

The pattern was cinched with her next film, provocatively titled *Dance, Fools, Dance (1931)*. Taking its inspiration from the infamous St. Valentine's Day massacre, the film once more set Crawford against a seamy underworld backdrop, although as an investigative newspaper reporter she is more an observer than a participant. Just to stay on the safe side, the scenarists also perpetuate the ghost of old Dangerous Diana in this outing; before her family loses its millions in the crash, Crawford cavorts semiclad amid midnight yacht parties in her most frolicsome manner. The mixture of these two elements was skillful, if derivative, and was another Crawford boxoffice bonanza for MGM.

However, *Dance, Fools, Dance* is most noteworthy for providing Clark Gable's first appearance in a Crawford vehicle. Gable was still being typecast as an oily hood at this stage; here he is the gangland boss who menaces first her brother and then Crawford herself. The role was smallish and completely unsympathetic, but his virility ignites every scene he has and blots out the colorless Lester Vail, who gets Joan in the end. More than anything else, audiences nōted the potent magnetism between Gable and Crawford, and clamored for more of the same.

The opportunity came sooner than anyone had anticipated. Crawford's next effort, *Complete Surrender*, was having serious problems during production as the chemistry between Crawford and her frequent co-star Johnny Mack Brown refused to jell this time. The studio then decided to replace Brown with Gable and reshoot the necessary footage under the new title of *Laughing Sinners* (1931). Crawford once again is found living a disillusioned and sordid existence as a tank-town night-club performer involved with a faithless traveling salesman, played by Neil Hamilton. The rest of the picture centers on the struggle between Hamilton and Gable as a Salvation Army captain for Crawford's capricious soul. As the wayward Ivy, she looked well and performed vibrantly, and the

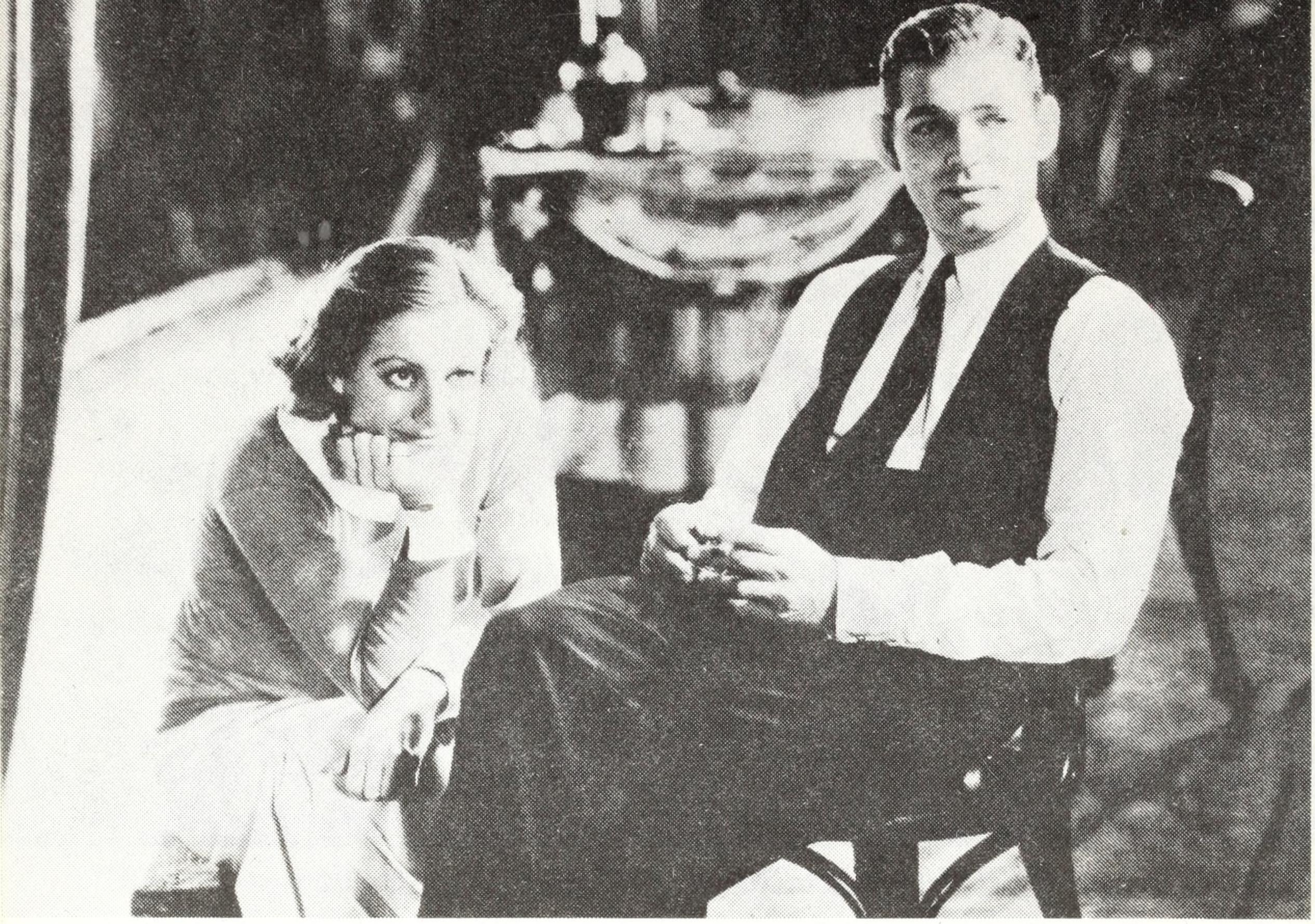


LAUGHING SINNERS (1931). With Clark Gable.

new Gable-Crawford combination caught on as expected. This was a remarkable feat considering that Gable was oddly cast as a blandly sanctimonious moralizer, and seemed as uneasy in the role as did Cary Grant opposite Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong* two years later.

Crawford then rebounded from muslin to satin in a misnamed anachronism called *This Modern Age* (1931). Crawford had welcomed the chance to play the noted Pauline Frederick's daughter in the film, as Frederick had been one of her early idols and an actress to whom she was often likened in the first years of her career. However, the script was hardly up to the occasion, and was further hampered by a sluggish job of direction by Nicholas Grinde, later the Nick Grinde of numerous Warners' potboilers. *This Modern Age* had Crawford dally with a drunken playboy before settling down with Neil Hamilton (the good guy this time). Crawford's usual dynamism was thwarted by the indecisiveness of the character she essayed, and by the dramatic futility of sorting out her feelings about two equally insipid leading men. Her hair was tinted platinum blonde for this role, but it clearly didn't suit her and wasn't tried again.

She rounded out a busy year with the first really definitive Gable-Crawford vehicle, which proved so lucrative that it served as the basis



POSSESSED (1931). On the set with Clark Gable.

for what was to become an annual tradition at Metro for the next few years. *Possessed* (1931) was the first of her films to counterpoint her against the genuine Gable persona: neither blackhearted nor scripture-spouting as before, but virile, brazen and down-to-earth. In many ways *Possessed* was the archetypal Crawford movie of those years; in fact variations of it recurred as late as the mid-fifties. As in *Paid*, she plays a distinctly lower-class woman with indomitable ambition to achieve something better for herself, who uses a succession of men as a ladder to wealth and class and social position. The top rung is Gable, a successful lawyer with marital problems, who offers Crawford everything but respectability. Things go awry due to Gable's political aspirations and Joan's unsavory status until the inevitable upbeat fadeout.

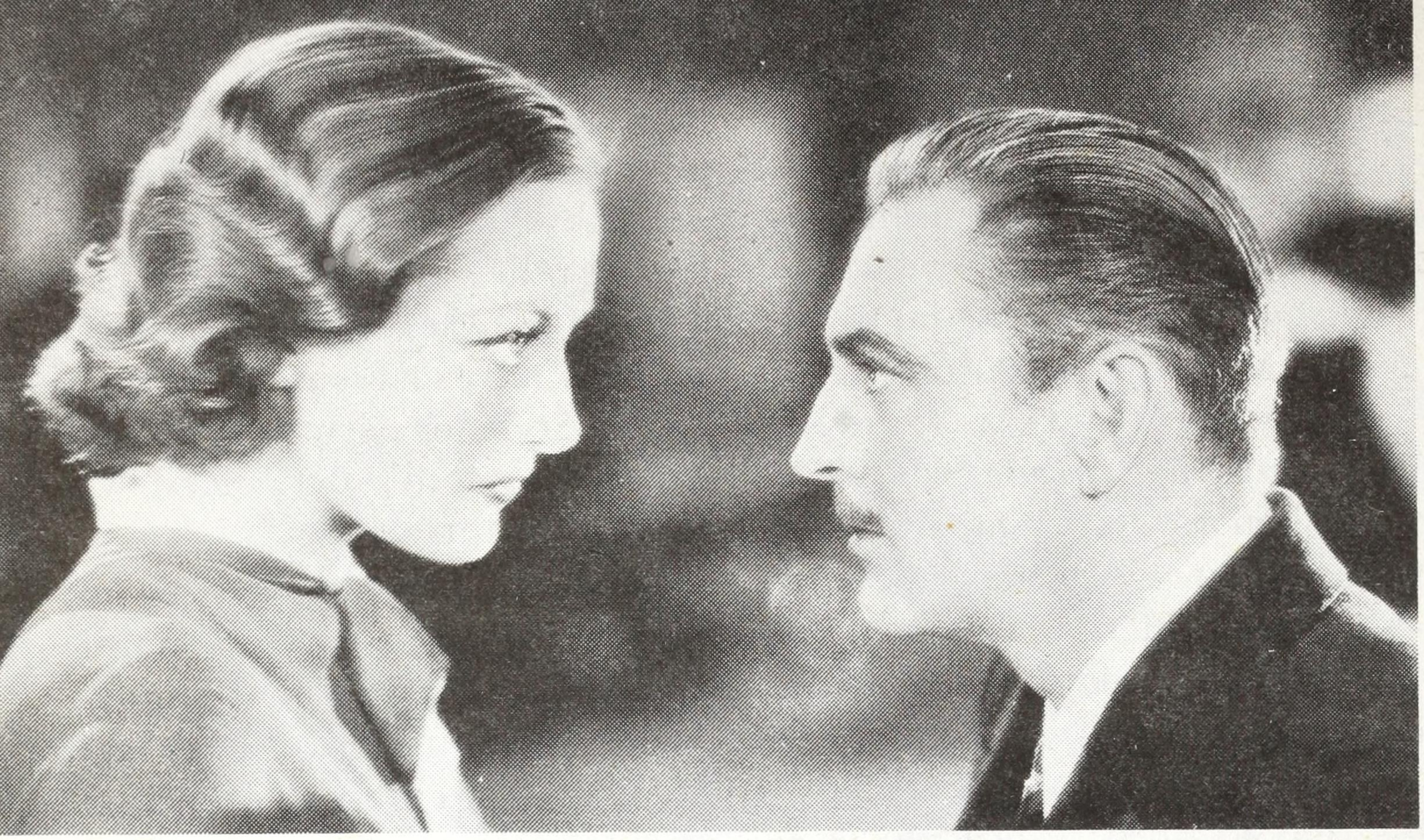
Her physical sineweiness and emotional toughness mesh effortlessly with Gable's in *Possessed*. It was refreshing to see Crawford finally paired opposite someone who radiated as much strength and personality as she did, and for once the obligatory sexual skirmishes had a real tension to them. Crawford couldn't histrionically overpower a Gable as handily as she could Johnny Mack Brown or Kent Douglass, and their bristling teamwork

brought the less than novel material to life. A lot of the credit also was due sensitive and accomplished director Clarence Brown, who was to guide many of Crawford's future efforts at MGM in the thirties.

Brown next put his hand to Crawford's *Letty Lynton* (1932), which is more interesting as a minor exercise in movie sociology than for its dramatic merits. This was the first of the Crawford clothes-horse extravaganzas, which were really a genre unto themselves. *Letty Lynton* and its successors were constructed to provide endless occasions for a poised and lacquered Joan to emanate chic in a heady succession of creations by Adrian while leaning against a Cedric Gibbons pillar and gazing at some handy and decorative male. The scripted excuses for these displays tended to be a bit on the vacuous side and even acting in the usual sense was superfluous. Style (or posturing, according to Crawford's detractors) was what mattered.

Letty herself was rather an impassive sort who spent an inordinate amount of time wavering between unctuous Nils Asther and straightforward Robert Montgomery. But as far as Joan's fans were concerned, that was irrelevant. What counted was that Joan exuded hauteur like Jungle Gardenia, wore dozens of outlandish ruffled frocks,

LETTY LYNTON (1932). With Nils Asther.



GRAND HOTEL (1932). With John Barrymore.

suffered long and ecstatically, and literally got away with murder in order to wind up in the embrace of the appropriate man.

After Letty, it was back to the working class with *Grand Hotel* (1932). Vicki Baum's celebrated play had been bought by Metro as the basis for the studio's first all-star dramatic picture. The studio with "more stars than there are in heaven" assembled the kind of dream cast only MGM could provide, and set its stars like jewels against the ostentatious mountings that were the studio's trademark. Despite the lofty reputation of the play, the player was definitely the thing in *Grand Hotel.* The basic material was the kind that Metro and Irving Thalberg in particular especially doted on: prestigious and ostensibly adult but really dependent more on slick craftsmanship than real depth or imagination.

These crisis-ridden hotel inhabitants are delineated with flamboyant skill by all the film's stars with the exception of Wallace Beery, who behaves as if he had a terminal case of delusions of Emil Jannings. As the sated and mercurial ballerina Grusinskaya, Garbo overplays her early scenes but turns rapturous as the woman of a certain age succumbing to love for the first time. She had never had such an adroit vis-á-vis as John Barrymore, whose off-screen debauches had begun to mar his appearance but had yet to undermine his talent. Their morning-after scene of farewell is played with a delicacy and maturity rare in Hollywood romances; each

GRAND HOTEL (1932).
WithWallace Beery.

seems touched by the artistry of the other. John's brother Lionel for once finds a suitable outlet for his irrepressible hamminess, and makes something genuinely poignant of the dying white-collar drudge Kringelein. Even stolid Lewis Stone finds unexpected resources as the embittered, battle-scarred doctor who keeps droning, "Nothing ever happens at the Grand Hotel."

Crawford had never found herself in such hallowed acting company, and she steeled herself to prove equal to the task. Flaemmchen is fundamentally no different from the characters she had played in *Paid* and *Possessed*; she is an ambitious stenographer who embarks on a series of loveless liaisons with wealthy admirers in order to get what she wants. Buoyed by the expert coaching of her old friend Edmund Goulding, Crawford's usual knowing chic is tempered by a gawky youthfulness which makes her rather sordid character both understandable and appealing. One of her most skillful scenes is a truly charming vignette in which the compassionate Flaemmchen tries to teach the gauche and bashful Kringelein to dance. This is ultimately topped by perhaps the best bit of acting she had done to date —the chilling moment when she discovers John Barrymore's corpse, his skull battered in by the swinish Beery. Her eyes enormous and sightless from the shock, she emits a spasm of barely audible moans, resembling a cornered and terrorized animal. Crawford was clearly beginning to learn that her greatest histrionic strength lay in suppressing emotion rather than venting it at random.

Made for the then extravagant sum of $700,000, *Grand Hotel* made a lot of money for the studio and copped the best-picture Oscar for the year as well. MGM had the foolhardy notion of remaking it in 1945, changing the locale from Berlin to New York and releasing the botched result as *Weekend at the Waldorf*. Garbo was supplanted by Ginger Rogers, of all people, and a whitewashed version of the Crawford character was essayed by a lifeless Lana Turner.

Crawford was encouraged by her triumph in *Grand Hotel*, and was determined to continue expanding her talents with provocative roles in prestigious films. As a result she relentlessly hounded the studio to loan her out to United Artists for the 1932 remake of W. Somerset Maugham's *Rain*. The omens looked promising enough: Sadie Thompson had brought laurels to Jeanne Eagels on stage and an Academy Award nomination for Gloria Swanson in the silent-film version. This attempt was to feature the estimable Walter Huston as

RAIN (1932). With William Gargan.

Reverend Davidson and was entrusted to the capable hands of Lewis Milestone, fresh from his directorial tours de force with *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Front Page.* Crawford herself had expressed her eagerness to tackle this powerhouse part as early as 1927. Regrettably it turned out to be the first real fiasco of her career, and the first time she had misjudged her talents and her audience since attaining stardom.

Actually *Rain* isn't really as bad as *This Modern Age* or *Our Modern Maidens* or similar slush which her public accepted unquestionably. The problem was that Crawford's screen image had been very carefully fabricated, and a tart like Sadie didn't conform to the pattern. Previous Crawford heroines had been venal and immoral to be sure, but never so blatantly as Sadie. The somewhat hypocritical veneer of sensibility she usually applied had been stripped away for once, and the public didn't like it. The critics were just as acid in their denunciation of Crawford's portrayal of

RAIN (1932). With Walter Huston.

Sadie, largely because they refused to believe that the idol of millions of ribbon clerks could possibly do justice to a part once monopolized by the sainted Eagels.

The truth is that even apart from Crawford, *Rain* was a botched-up job by all concerned. Viewed today, it's hard to believe that *Rain* was ever regarded as anything more than pretentious kitsch to begin with. Despite the film's brevity it seems endless, weighed down by its stagy conventions and the endless stream of talk. Milestone tries to make the film seem more cinematic with a constant series of tracking camera movements, most of which have no relevance at all to what is really going on. This attempt only points up the director's lack of interest in shaping the performances of his cast, and nobody really comes off very well. The most obvious victim is Huston, who captures all of Davidson's inherent pomposity but none of his magnetism. Without that essential element, the climactic scene of Sadie's conversion, in which Davidson practically hypnotizes Sadie into reciting the Lord's Prayer, seems absurd and to-

tally unmotivated.

Crawford's performance is the most problematic. Her entrance is an alarming omen of what is to come: first her bangle-encircled arm is seen clutching a beaded curtain, followed by a montage of shots of her legs and high heels, climaxed by a close-up of her grotesquely transfigured face. Her eyes are rimmed by tons of beaded mascara and the lower half of her face drools lipstick from ear to ear. She hardly seems human, more resembling a raccoon taken to the streets. Unfortunately her performance is as externally applied as her clownish make-up. The audience never perceives Sadie's supposed complexity because Crawford doesn't seem to understand it either. When Sadie is temporarily transformed into the tremulous penitent seeking salvation, Crawford achieves a few luminous moments but the changeover is too complete—this Sadie seems totally unrelated to the hoyden of the first hour of the film.

She seemed to be on surer ground with *Today We Live* (1933). It permitted her to wear glamourous togs again, dally illicitly with Robert Young, lose herself utterly to Gary Cooper (loaned from Paramount for the occasion) and endure considerable anguish along the way—all against the turbulent backdrop of the aerial dogfighting in World War I. Yet as it turned out, *Today We Live* presented her with several difficult obstacles to hurdle. For one thing, it required her to be English, a challenge she tried to meet primarily by broadening her Culver City vowels even more than they already were. More importantly, director Howard Hawks was predictably more interested in the battle sequences and the rapport between men under the pressures of warfare than he was in the romantic interludes featuring Crawford. In William Faulkner's original story these sequences had been really just an afterthought anyway, half-heartedly built up when the studio complained that the female role was too minor in scope for a star of Crawford's stature. The result was an unsatisfactory mélange—neither a polished standard Crawford vehicle nor a vivid canvas of men at war, but something uneasily in between.

With two unsuccessful offerings behind her, Crawford's career was showing signs of real trouble. Both she and the studio realized that she had to get back on home ground with her next picture as soon as possible. After a few years of quiescence, musicals had returned to public favor with the first of the Warner Brothers-Busby Berkeley extravaganzas. Hence *Dancing Lady* (1933) was shrewdly concocted to cash in on the vogue and reaffirm Crawford's popularity in a part that was second nature to her.

As tap-happy Janie she could dust off her dancing daughter Capezios and revive her post-*Paid* personality at the same time.

With its tawdry backstage milieu and tough, slangy repartee, the film is most untypical of the usual Metro "A" product. Everywhere the influence of *Forty-Second Street* raises its specter, from the absurdly ornate production numbers down to the characterizations in the lead roles. Gable's maniacal stage director who molds Crawford from chorine to star is blatantly lifted from the Warner Baxter role in the Berkeley film. Reportedly Gable didn't want to do the film to begin with, and his hostility shows—he plays with far more abrasiveness than is absolutely necessary. Crawford's spot is basically Ruby Keeler all over again, infused with a helpful dose of her usual raffishness and drive. She traces Janie's rise from dancing stripper to Broadway star, pausing only to reflect on the lure of orchids and Park Avenue, as represented by Franchot Tone. In the end Broadway and Gable win out, previous movie roles having taught her that girls from tenements and boys from penthouses don't mix. She is most appealing in the film's early sequences while still the unabashed proletarian kid with the

TODAY WE LIVE (1933). With Robert Young.

DANCING LADY (1933). As Janie.

DANCING LADY (1933). On the set with Fred Astaire.

grammar of a guttersnipe, the appetite of a raven, and the clothes sense of a frill fetishist. Unfortunately the more Tone she acquires, the less vital she gets.

Crawford's highly touted terpsichorean efforts are unremarkable at best. The tap routine which convinces Gable of her potential is enthusiastic but rather graceless—she works at it too hard for it to seem as agile and spontaneous as intended. She later attempts a ballroom-swing number, a mock-serious Bavarian polka, and a second tap effort to more or less the same result. Crawford's large public applauded her versatility—it reinforced her image as the game achiever who could do anything she set her mind to. Still the studio sensed that her real forte lay elsewhere and that *Dancing Lady* was a one-shot gimmick at best.

Dancing Lady was notable if anything for a couple of pleasant tunes, including the perennial "Everything I Have Is Yours," and for introducing Fred Astaire to the screen in a bit part playing himself. Astaire is only present as Crawford's obligatory dancing partner and his charm and bravura talents aren't given any chance to emerge here. The film also marked the feature debuts of Nelson Eddy and the Three Stooges.

While Crawford was hoofing her soles off in *Dancing Lady,* her personal life was taking a more sober turn. Her marriage to Fairbanks had been deteriorating for some time, and after a period of separation she received her final divorce decree in May, 1933. She analyzed her marital failure in a subsequent interview with the succinct phrase, "It is impossible for two people to

live up to an ideal created by Hollywood publicity."

Yet Crawford's amours provided endless grist for the fan-magazine publicity mill, and it was next breathlessly reported that her convincing love scenes with Gable in *Dancing Lady* and the like were by no means confined to their professional duties on the sound stage. When the hubbub over this tidbit subsided a little, the sob sisters shifted their gaze to Franchot Tone, who had already appeared twice on screen with Crawford. Like Crawford's ex-husband, Fairbanks, Tone came from a background as impeccable as hers was threadbare. Son of an industrial magnate, honor graduate of Cornell and fervent disciple of the prestigious Group Theater, Tone represented a way of life guided by standards loftier than those usually encountered on the MGM lot. Crawford was very much dazzled by this accomplished man, and their long courtship inspired almost as much frenzied conjecture

With husband Franchot Tone.

SADIE McKEE (1934). As Sadie.

in print as had her first engagement five years before. After their marriage in 1935, the hausfrauish Mrs. Fairbanks of yore transformed herself into the knowing and urbane Mrs. Tone, devotee of Culture and Art. For the next few years she was to issue periodic warnings of her intention to abandon screen stardom temporarily for a crack at the spiritual rewards of the theater.

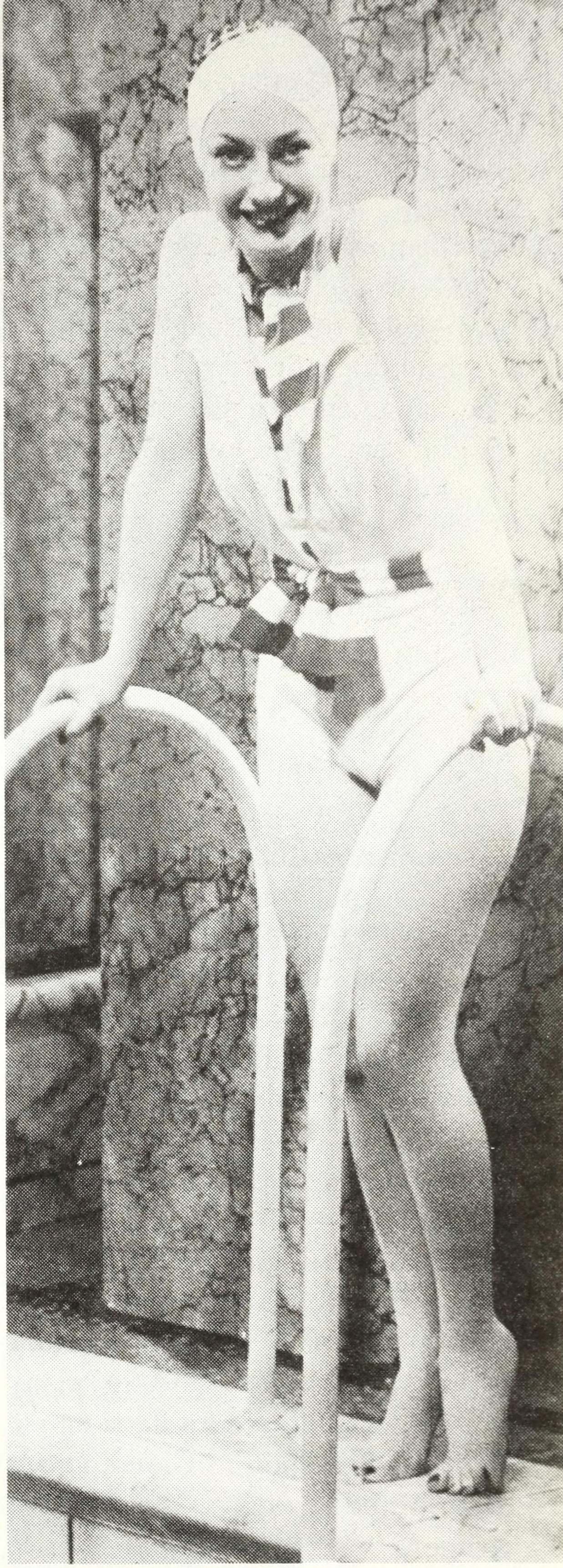
While waiting for that irresistible stage property to come along, Crawford continued entrancing the more plebian movie public with the likes of *Sadie McKee* (1934). Sadie was the last for a time of the upwardly mobile heroines that audiences liked to see her tackle most. As usual, the script was as transparent as a soap bubble, but in this case Crawford's earnestness and director Clarence Brown's restraint and sensitivity made something genuinely entertaining out of this mass of clichés.

Sadie McKee is a one-picture lexicon of Crawford situations and attitudes up to 1934. She played a cook's daughter who, in the course

of eighty-eight event-crowded minutes, falls in love with her wealthy employer's son (Franchot Tone), is treated badly by her blue-collar boyfriend (Gene Raymond), and finally marries a benign but alcoholic plutocrat (Edward Arnold). Maligned by all as a callous gold digger, she still manages to bring Arnold back to sobriety while pining for Raymond, who is gradually expiring from a terminal case of TB. At the same time, Tone recognizes her innate goodness and professes to love her. Sadie obtains her freedom from the understanding Arnold, and, with her tangled affairs unraveled once and for all, Sadie sees her way clear for a life of self-respect, love, wealth and Tone, accompanied by smiles, kisses, and a slow fadeout.

Crawford passes through this maze exuding her usual smooth competence. This heroine's emotional indecision is complicated by the fact that Raymond and Tone are as bland and interchangeable as two slices of white bread. It's doubtful that anyone could make Sadie really believable, but thanks to the even intensity of Crawford's characterization she is at least arresting and sympathetic.

Clarence Brown also directed *Chained* (1934), but this one was upper-class love and sacrifice of the *Letty Lynton* variety. It is easy to understand why films like *Chained*



CHAINED (1934).
As Diane Lovering.

so appealed to luxury-starved Depression movie fans. The movie passes from one glamorous locale to another as Crawford endures the most exquisite of agonies while arrayed in the gauziest of gowns. Should she remain loyal to kindly, paternal shipping czar Otto Kruger, who has given up a marriage of long standing and even visiting rights to his children in order to have her? Ought she allow herself to succumb to the virile charms of cattle rancher Gable, who has never before permitted a female to trespass on his precious pampas? Half the women in America would have gladly died for such tempting options.

Crawford is right at home amid such doings. Although the heroine's origins are somewhat vague, Crawford seems to the manner born, always elegant and urbane and composed. Her wry sense of the romantic is *so* impeccably genteel; while aboard ship she daily orders the absent Kruger's preferred beverage (sherry) at the appointed hour (six), until Gable converts her to daiquiris and rank passion.

The keynote to Crawford's emotions in *Chained* is self-abnegation, as in *Sadie McKee* and so many others. She suffers infinite remorse over her attraction to Gable, and is determined to stick by the steadfast Kruger, even if this dooms her to permanent longing and sorrow. Although she proceeds to wander through the next few reels as the living portrait of catatonic depression, Crawford only gives Kruger up when he practically thrusts her into Gable's arms. While the two rivals diplomatically endeavor to resolve her future, Crawford stands aside as a curiously passive observer to her fate—a situation which is repeated almost exactly in *Daisy Kenyon* thirteen years later.

Brown's direction is as satiny as the material, once more managing to make it seem more literate and honest than it really is. As before Crawford and Gable's star charm and sexual magnetism in tandem more than justify their repeated teamings. Apart from Gable, the leading men in Crawford's films tend to be necessary accessories to her romantic fictions rather than genuine love partners. In such cases Crawford usually concentrates on transmitting her emotions to the camera without relating to the man in question any more than is necessary. However, she genuinely projects a personal attraction to Gable and for once plays her scenes to him as well as to her audience.

On completing *Chained,* Gable and Crawford were immediately reunited in *Forsaking All Others* (1934), another gilded love triangle. This time around it was played for rowdy comedy and the result is one of Crawford's most pleasant films of the period. Graced with a witty

FORSAKING ALL OTHERS (1934). With Robert Montgomery.

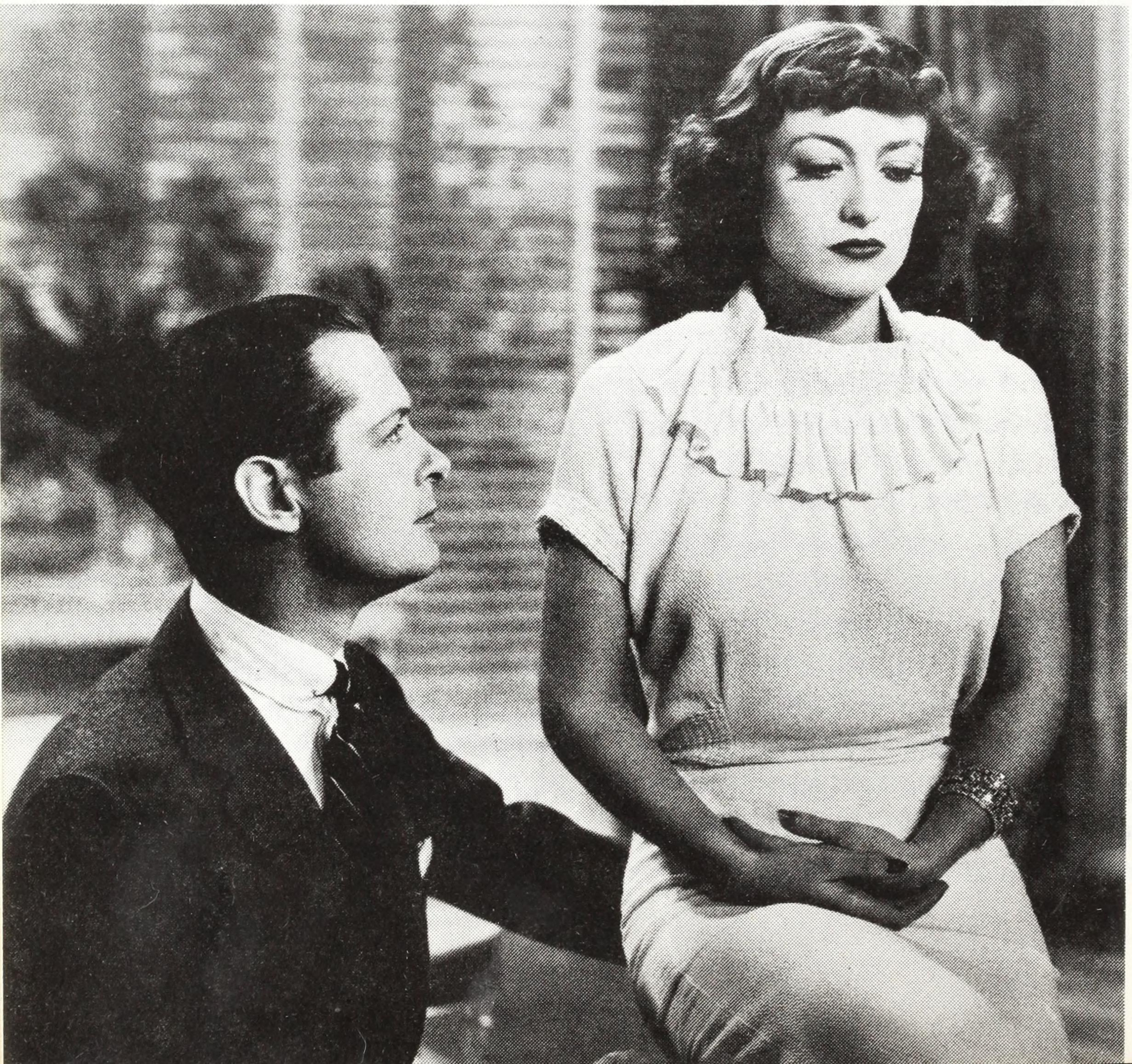
Joseph Mankiewicz script and W. S. Van Dyke's breezy direction, the pace and performances are brisk enough for the audience to ignore the banality of the plot until after it's all over.

Forsaking All Others has Crawford wavering between Robert Montgomery, a rather pixilated gadfly, and a patiently adoring Gable. In dizzy succession she is jilted at the altar by Montgomery, consoled by Gable, spirited off for an abortive country weekend by her repentant groom, and in turn leaves Montgomery in the lurch when she realizes that her heart has really belonged to Gable all along. Complementing the smooth dialogue is a surprising amount of slapstick for a Crawford vehicle. Montgomery bears the brunt of most of it, submitting even to the indignity of cavorting about in one of Crawford's peignoirs before a skirmish with a temperamental fireplace turns him into a human torch. Even Crawford at one point finds herself careening atop a bicycle one minute and upended in a pigsty the next.

Crawford's technique is a bit too deliberate for comedy to be her strongest suit, but her vitality and high spirits compensate for the spontaneity she rather lacks. Montgomery is amusing though a trifle arch, while Gable glides along in his best *It Happened One Night* style. *Forsaking All Others* proved a cheery interlude for all concerned.

Crawford next shifted to the more genteel whimsy of *No More Ladies* (1935). As a play by A.E. Thomas it had been just one more of countless imitations of Philip Barry's semi-philosophical society comedies, and its static, derivative quality was only underscored when transferred to the screen. Crawford enacted a young matron holding firm to the staunch values of honor and fidelity, Montgomery was her blithely slipshod spouse, and Franchot Tone the bachelor eager to divest Joan of her scruples. Crawford's chic lethargy exasperated director George Cukor into drilling her to distraction in the vain hope of infusing some life into her line readings. Such asperity had not

NO MORE LADIES (1935). With Robert Montgomery.



I LIVE MY LIFE (1935). With Brian Aherne.

been expected of Cukor, who had only been brought onto the picture midway through production, to replace ailing Edward H. Griffith. Crawford was sage enough to discern the truth in Cukor's diatribes, and accepted his censure gracefully. His instincts were to bear fruit a few years later, when he elicited the most forceful performances she ever gave at MGM.

The vacuum left by *No More Ladies* was filled by another formula-bound comedy entitled *I Live My Life* (1935). Like its predecessors, this movie was palatable enough but devoid of any originality or genuine style. Crawford again is a dues-paying member of the horsy set, sporting eyelashes as long as her cigarette holder. Shedding the sanctimoniousness of *No More Ladies*, she plays an American aristocrat of the carefree, fun-loving sort until some sense is knocked into her by a stable and earthbound male. Usually this chore was dealt to Gable, but this time it was placed in the suave hands of Brian Aherne as a sobersides archeologist who takes Crawford's flirtatious nature more seriously than she at first intended.

Most of *I Live My Life* is devoted to tiresome permutations of the ground rules beloved of thirties romances, as Crawford and Aherne chase each other to Greece and back again. Luckily, W.S. Van Dyke is again on hand to keep the momen-

THE GORGEOUS HUSSY (1936).
With Melvyn Douglas.

tum going while he chips away at Crawford's brittle façade whenever the chance arises. In this vein Van Dyke has her lurch astride an uncooperative mule before sliding backside-first down a bumpy hillside, damaging nothing but her dignity. Sometimes Crawford's exuberance is a bit too larky for comfort, but at least her bursts of spirit tend to take the edge off all that glacial sophistication.

Crawford was as aware as anyone of the bland sameness of such vehicles as these, and she vowed to do something about it fast. She waged a tempestuous campaign for a strong costume part to pull her out of her modern rut; finally Metro relented and concocted *The Gorgeous Hussy* (1936) to quiet her down. A demure all-American predecessor of *Forever Amber*, it looked like her most challenging opportunity in years. The hussy in question was one "Pothouse Peg" O'Neal, an innkeeper's daughter who became Andrew Jackson's confidante and the bewitcher of every likely bachelor in antebellum Washington. Not only did the role call for considerately more range than had been required of her since *Rain*, but it also afforded her the chance to romance four of MGM's top leading men, rather than the regulation two. And thanks to its semblance of a historical background, it even had the kind of pretensions to importance that Crawford had begun to cultivate under Tone's tutelage.

As it turned out, *The Gorgeous Hussy* was indeed something of a step forward for Crawford, but a more faltering one than she had anticipated. As so often occurred with lavish Metro product, the movie's slickness tends to sap its vitality. Some faint attempt is made to deal with the political issues of the era, but states' rights and the like invariably take a back seat to Peg's less intellectual enthusiasms. This of course was in the natural order of things in Hollywood, and might have seemed justified if only Peg's love life weren't so sanitized and conventional. Unfortunately, Peg, is about as brazen as a Campfire Girl. She rebuffs gawky admirer James Stewart, is rebuffed in turn by middle-aged Dixie Senator Melvyn Douglas, honorably weds naval captain Robert Taylor, and just as decorously marries Yankee legislator Franchot Tone upon Taylor's death. Her most enduring relationship links her with Old Hickory, and that is purely a matter of the spirit. Peg is motivated solely by the most civilized instincts, and one longs for her to do just one carnal or calculating thing and justify her scarlet reputation.

All of Peg's ribbons and hoopskirts fail to disguise the Joan Crawford whose rites and moods were governed by the immutable

laws of her star image. As usual, she is a woman of admirable strength and pragmatism, who insists on being taken seriously as a thinking individual, not just as a fetching bauble. However, her mental clarity becomes as muddled as ever by her irrepressible romanticism. Nearly two hours' running time and a couple of convenient demises are required to pass before Peg can find a semblance of emotional stability.

She had wreaked minor variations on this theme through so many films that by now her boredom with it all was beginning to show. She floats through the film with assurance but precious little incisiveness as the pariah Peg, leaving most of the livelier moments to the likes of Lionel Barrymore and Beulah Bondi as Andrew and Rachel Jackson. Undoubtedly much of *The Gorgeous Hussy*'s blandness must be attributed to Crawford's own listlessness at this point.

From antebellum Washington Crawford returned to the contemporary milieu that had always been her standby. First she was reteamed with Gable, Tone and W. S. Van Dyke for a screwball comedy called *Love On The Run* (1936). This was another of the countless offshoots of *It Happened One Night* that crowded the screen during the mid-thirties, and it is so derivative of the Capra film that one wonders how Metro avoided a plagiarism suit. Crawford plays the flighty heiress type first patented by Claudette Colbert, who at the last moment takes it on the lam from an unwelcome marriage to a nobleman. Gable once more is the cool-headed newspaperman who aides the heroine in her ruse. Tone as usual is just along for the ride.

Gable and Colbert trekked across the East Coast by bus and on foot; Gable and Crawford traverse Europe via oxcart and airplane. The only real variation to the formula was the addition of a parody-espionage subplot, and even that was hardly novel. *Love on the Run* was enjoyable enough and quite popular upon its release, but gave a disquieting hint of the direction Crawford's career was henceforth to take. Other recent films had been derivative, but at least they borrowed from formulas she had originated. *Love on the Run* drew its inspiration from standards set by other actresses, and Crawford in effect was imitating their past successes.

The situation was to worsen with Crawford's next two roles. She was wise enough to turn down the female lead in *Parnell*, Gable's first major flop, but it was the only smart move she made during the next year at Metro. Her first error was to star in the second film version of Frederick Lonsdale's international

LOVE ON THE RUN (1936). With Franchot Tone.

comedy success, *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* (1937). Mrs. Cheyney is a chic jewel thief who plies her trade while mingling with the nobs in England's stateliest homes. In the process she toys with a couple of frivolous lords before retiring from the profession scot-free and with one of her victims (Robert Montgomery) romantically in tow. Ina Claire had scored in the part on Broadway in the mid-twenties, and Norma Shearer had followed through with a popular early talkie version in 1929. This was Crawford's chance to prove that she was just as light of touch as these illustrious predecessors. However, the plot was rather too familiar by 1937 to intrigue the public much, and Crawford's personality failed to mesh smoothly with this milieu of teacups and tiaras.

Crawford's second mistake was to appear in the nonsensical *The Bride Wore Red* (1937). Based on one of Ferenc Molnar's more obscure plays, the film returned Crawford to the dowdy dirndls she had worn so inauspiciously in *Dream of Love*. As Anni, the shopworn Cinderella of Trieste, Crawford passes from cynical café songstress to worldly and mysterious lady of leisure to peasant bride of a Tyrolean postman. Her checkered progress is naturally measured in terms of a succession of admiring men, principally Robert Young and Franchot Tone. Almost a parody of the usual Crawford social caste tugs of war, it was wildly implausible by any standards and defeated all of director Dorothy Arzner's considerable efforts to bring it to life. *The Bride Wore Red* got the worst critical drubbing a Crawford film had received in years, and even her devoted following failed to keep it out of the red-ink ledgers.

Crawford was obviously in serious trouble at this point. A string of

THE LAST OF MRS. CHEYNEY (1937).
With Robert Montgomery.

THE BRIDE WORE RED (1937). With Robert Young and Billie Burke.

mediocre vehicles such as *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* and *The Bride Wore Red* would have been dangerous enough for some regulation movie leading lady; for a star of Crawford's magnitude, whose every career move was watched with particular attention, the storm signals were really out in force. The *Motion Picture Herald*'s annual poll of exhibitors claimed that between 1931 and 1938 her box-office rating had plummeted from third place in Hollywood to somewhere between twenty-fifth and sixtieth place, and the *Independent Film Journal* subsequently published an exhibitors' blacklist of expensive stars who were "box-office poison." Prominent on the list were Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Fred Astaire, Katharine Hepburn—and Joan Crawford. Both in and out of the industry, the opinion spread that America's favorite dancing daughter was fast pirouetting into obscurity. What all these Cassandras failed to reckon with was the indomitability of Crawford herself. She had faced such problems before, and was damned if she was going to take her recent reverses lying down.

For a short period, Crawford treaded water while searching for a new screen persona to replace the outmoded old one. At first she threatened to turn into the contralto Jeanette MacDonald and re-capture her old admirers with her dazzling vocal talents. Stories were released reporting that Crawford was busily at work training her voice for an operatic debut under the tutelage of Rosa Ponselle's vocal coach. She recorded some duets with Ponselle and with MGM contract player Douglas MacPhail, which the public never got to hear, and proclaimed that her movie metamorphosis into a classical diva was just around the corner. Apparently the result of all this preparation was less auspicious than was hoped, for this new facet never materialized on screen.

Although Crawford's future remained uncertain, MGM was convinced that those gloomy prophecies in the trade papers were a bit premature. When her old contract providing her with $125,000 a picture finally lapsed in 1938, she was at first offered a new one-year pact at the upped scale of $150,000 per film. Instead Crawford opted for the security of a longer contract at slightly less lucrative terms, and signed a five-year deal calling for her to make three films a year for a total sum of $1,500,000.

THE STAR IN TRANSITION

Her first vehicle under the new pact was *Mannequin* (1938), directed by Frank Borzage, and co-starring Spencer Tracy. This was a definite cut above the likes of her last few movies but hardly the break-through she was looking for. *Mannequin* is a clear case of a lot of talented people doing their utmost to surmount the most threadbare material—and almost succeeding.

Basically a rehash of her pre-clothes-horse efforts, the film features Crawford as a careworn denizen of the Lower East Side who labors in a garment factory to support her layabout father, submissive mother and hoodlum brother. Desperate to escape the squalor of her surroundings, she marries her longtime beau. At this point she meets Tracy, a slum rat turned shipping magnate and a good Joe who falls hard for plucky young Joan. Meanwhile the young couple's prospects worsen as the groom promotes himself into trouble with the law; Crawford finally wises up and sorrowfully sheds her worthless husband. She moves from the chorus to haute couture and marries the adoring Tracy for emotional and fiscal security. To-

MANNEQUIN (1938). As Jessica Cassidy.

gether they endure all sorts of trauma, including a shipping strike which wipes out their fortune and a blackmail attempt by Joan's ex, before Crawford realizes her true feelings for Tracy and convinces him just in time of her love and loyalty.

Borzage endows the film with genuine warmth, managing once in a while to disguise its basic shallowness. The impact of Tracy's contribution to *Mannequin* is incalculable. He was the most talented co-star Crawford had ever had; in *Mannequin* he typically delivers a performance of extraordinary subtlety and humor and manages the feat of bringing Crawford down to earth without arrogance or condescension. Crawford herself is hampered by the fact that Jessie Cassidy is pure Sadie McKee all over again. The character is both a tough, determined social climber and a Good Girl who believes in pristine morality and True Love above all else.

Crawford does her utmost to bring Jessie to life, imbuing her

MANNEQUIN (1938). With Spencer Tracy.

with a touching simplicity that had been lacking in recent performances. At one point, Crawford longingly recalls her first courtship and the sobering disillusionment that has followed with a subdued poignance rare for her. Unfortunately both her performance and the film itself deteriorate steadily from the time the heroine accepts Tracy's proposal of marriage. Their European honeymoon is MGM emotion at its hollowest, culminating with Joan in peasant blouse and apron inside a sound-stage ivy-twined cottage that bears as much resemblance to anything Irish as L.B. Mayer's executive suite. Still, *Mannequin* gave solid proof that she was striving to refine her acting skills beyond the slick proficiency of her recent glamour efforts.

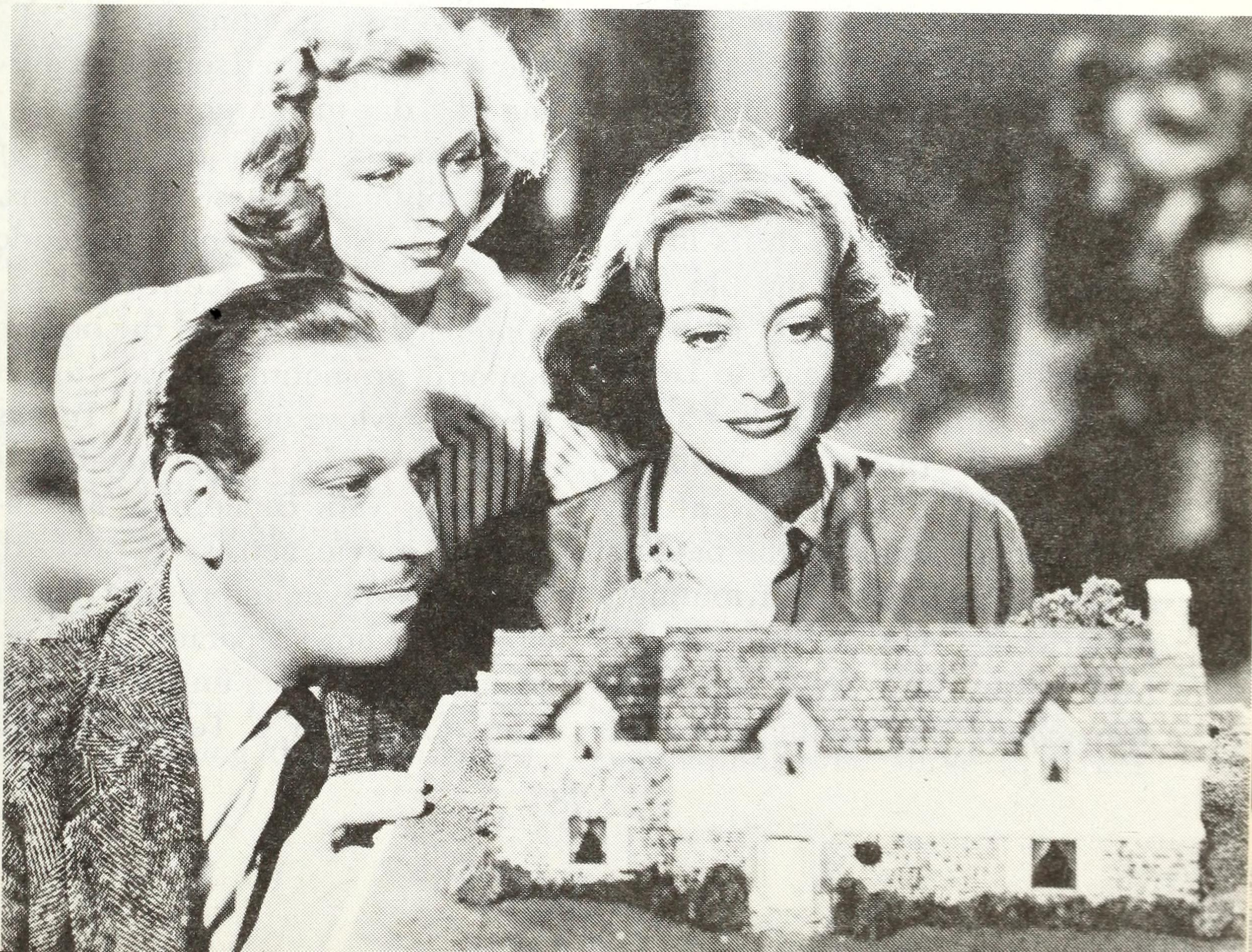
Crawford was next slated to appear in an original scenario by F. Scott Fitzgerald entitled *Infidelity*. It dealt with the rift that arises between a once happily-wed couple due to a momentary indiscretion of the husband, and promised to be the most provocative material she had been offered in some time. Unfortunately, the all-powerful Hays

Office frowned upon any and all screen treatment of adultery, however unsympathetic, and the project had to be shelved. Instead Crawford proceeded to *The Shining Hour* (1938), the film version of a play she had admired during its Broadway run. Once more guided by Frank Borzage, Crawford was backed up with unusually strong support, including Melvyn Douglas, Margaret Sullavan, Robert Young, and Fay Bainter. Despite the talented cast, the finished film was something of a disappointment.

A verbose affair of social snobbery and familial jealousy, *The Shining Hour* is slick and unconvincing, relying far too heavily on the ability of its stars to put it over. Crawford plays Olivia, née Maggie Riley, a dancer from Tenth Avenue whose marriage to gentleman-farmer Douglas encounters serious obstacles in the persons of her husband's jealous and possessive sister (Bainter) and his libidinous married brother (Young). Margaret Sullavan essays Young's long-suffering wife who is almost barbecued in a climactic fire set by Bainter. After all this *sturm ünd drang*, all eventually ends happily for Crawford.

This rather melodramatic outline screens no better than it reads, with the motivations of each character blaring like air-raid si-

THE SHINING HOUR(1938). With Melvyn Douglas and Margaret Sullavan.



THE ICE FOLLIES OF 1939 (1939). With James Stewart.

rens. None of these reliable performers can do much with such transparent roles, and Sullavan and Bainter in particular are much more mannered than usual. Crawford is handed the best of a bad lot in terms of dialogue and situations, some of which reflect her own personal history in an eerie fashion. "I was too busy dipping shirts in the laundry and picking my old man out of the gutter [to gain an education]," she explains to Douglas, later adding, "I look like a lady sometimes—that's my trouble. That's as far as I go." Eventually even she succumbs to the banality of the proceedings, contributing a performance that seems quite listless after her fine work in *Mannequin*. *The Shining Hour* was more serious in intent than her recent films preceding *Mannequin* but equally lifeless, and its reception was mild.

Crawford's standing on MGM's star roster improved somewhat during 1938 due to her successful teaming with Tracy. *The Ice Follies of 1939* obliterated these slight gains. Thanks to Sonja Henie's meteoric success at 20th Century-Fox, somebody at Metro had the bizarre notion of promoting Crawford as the newest Pavlova of the rink. To this end, the studio basted together a ludicrous yarn concerning an ambitious movie actress (Crawford) and an ice-revue impresario (James Stewart) whose separate career instincts divide them until they combine forces for a Technicolored

screen extravaganza on skates. During production the studio belatedly realized that Crawford was surer on terra firma than on ice and relegated most of the skating to the experts from the International Ice Follies. This left Crawford to cope with a brainless script and Hedy Lamarr's cast-off coiffure. It was hardly her fault that she managed neither.

After this fiasco, Crawford had no time to lose if she was going to salvage her loosening grasp on film stardom. The opportunity came when MGM bought the rights to Clare Boothe's Broadway success, *The Women*. This catty exposé of female low life in high places brimmed with juicy parts for stellar actresses, and Crawford opted to play Crystal, the predatory shopgirl who lures Norma Shearer's husband away from the hearth. Crystal is cheap and vicious and utterly unsympathetic, the first such part Crawford had ever tackled. Furthermore, it was little more than a glorified supporting role, providing Crawford with only four scenes during the more than two hours of running time. Still, Crystal was a strong role in a sure hit, and Crawford took her chances.

From the beginning, this ambitious project was besieged with production complications. The screenwriters assigned to do the adaptation were faced with the dilemma of toning down the play's caustic ribaldry without diluting its wit. After a succession of scenarists finally solved that one, the studio decided to play directors' musical chairs on four films then in production. The result was that George Cukor was taken off *Gone with the Wind* to do *The Women*, replacing Ernst Lubitsch who helmed *Ninotchka* instead. When filming began at long last, soothsayers eagerly predicted that fireworks would erupt with such prima donnas as Shearer, Crawford, Rosalind Russell, Paulette Goddard, and Joan Fontaine assembled on the same sound stage. They weren't disappointed for long. Norma and Joan had never exactly been on the most cordial of terms, and their glacial enmity on the set more than equaled their seething rivalry in the script.

For all these distractions, the film is a superior treatment of a less-than-first-rate play. Boothe's satire of wealthy women with nothing on their idle minds but gossip, grooming, and other women's husbands is a feminists' nightmare. Their lives are solely defined in terms of the men they have hooked, and they view each other as mortal enemies. Nor is this feminine self-loathing limited to the upper classes in this rarefied milieu which no men ever penetrate. The maids, beauticians, and mannequins who serve as Greek

chorus to these lamé-draped Trojans are more clear-eyed in their pursuits but just as shallow and ruthless. The story peg holding up this jaundiced view of womankind is hackneyed and perfunctory. Clare Boothe's vitriolic pen is far more adroit at fashioning nasty bitches than sweet heroines, and the virtuous Mary Haines is far too insipid for anyone to care much whether she gets her invisible husband back or not.

What holds both the play and the film together is the author's unerring ear for tart invective. Under George Cukor's confident direction, the wisecracks explode with the precision of gunfire, sparked by a troupe of actresses only a studio like MGM at its apex could have assembled. Cukor's reputation had been founded on his ability to coax extraordinary performances out of his female stars, and most of the women perform superlatively under his guidance. Rosalind Russell, as the most obvious of the vixens, and Paulette Goddard, the knowing chorine who cuckolds her, are uproarious—particularly when they match forces in a dirty knock-down brawl. Mary Boland practically steals the show as the bovine and lascivious Countess De Lave, who expresses her ecstasies and sorrows in deliciously fractured French. Only the perennially arch Norma Shearer lowers this high standard as dreary Mary Haines, failing completely to divest the role of its innate coyness.

Crawford thrives amid such strong competition and is striking and vivid as Crystal. This tramp is basically just the wicked stepsister to all those slum-to-duplex heroines Crawford had patented for nearly a decade. Like Sadie and Jessie and Flaemmchen, Crystal grapples for her share of the gravy, but without troubling herself with all that malarkey about love, fidelity, and virtue. Usually wealth is the fringe benefit and a worthy man the goal, but in *The Women* Crawford reverses the priorities. Crystal knows exactly what she wants and is canny enough to use sex as the bait. From the moment Crawford is glimpsed leering behind the perfume counter, it is glaringly clear why her quarry has left the frumpy Norma at home with their drippy child. Crawford is hardly coy about the nature of her allure. As she explains to Shearer in their bristling dressing-room encounter, "When Stephen doesn't like something I'm wearing, I just take it off."

The most remarkable thing about Crawford's performance is the wide gamut she has achieved with her vocal range as Crystal. Perhaps for the first time her voice is as striking as her physical presence, and as effective in forging a

THE WOMEN (1939). With Phyllis Povah and Rosalind Russell.

THE WOMEN (1939). With Norma Shearer (in white hat), Rosalind Russell and Phyllis Povah (on couch).

characterization. While speaking over the phone to Haines or the stud who replaces him, the tone is as smooth as crushed velvet. In moments of stress when her origins betray her, the voice is nasal and shrill and as coarse as sandpaper. Usually her pseudo-upper-crust accent seems more than a trifle affected. Here it is perfect, the emblem of a hardboiled tart trying to acquire some class in a hurry.

Crawford's professional coup came at a critical moment in her personal life. Her marriage of four years to Franchot Tone had long been on shaky ground, and many of their difficulties centered on their clashing career ambitions. He felt stifled by the bland succession of male consorts he was forced to play at Metro and longed to return to the stage; Crawford of course was a preeminent film star, far more at ease on a sound stage than under a proscenium. This rift exacerbated their more intimate problems, until their marriage was dissolved in 1939. At that point Crawford decided that even if she wasn't destined to be a wife, she could still fulfill her desire for motherhood. A series of miscarriages had made it impossible for her to give birth to children of her own, so she adopted the first of four children she ultimately was to have, a daughter named Christina.

If anything, these developments on the home front only intensified her resolve to maintain the momentum set off by *The Women.* She succeeded admirably with *Strange Cargo* (1940), which marked the beginning of her most fruitful period at Metro. Teamed with Gable for the eighth and last time, she plays a cynical dance-hall hostess who is banished for flagrant immorality from a sultry isle housing a penal colony. She then begins an arduous trek for the mainland with a group of escaped cons, including Gable and the Christlike Ian Hunter. During their perilous journey, the spiritual influence of Hunter convinces them all to heed their souls for the first time in their lives. Gable returns to the island to serve his time, with an ennobled Crawford waiting patiently for his release.

Strange Cargo enjoyed a rather mixed reception on its release. The film is a curious mixture of gritty melodrama and somber spirituality, and audiences expected something a little more epic from Gable so soon after *Gone with the Wind.* Some moralists found Hunter's rather literal portrayal of a reincarnated Son of God blasphemous, and banned the film from several communities. Seen today, *Strange Cargo* holds up superbly. Director Frank Borzage was an old hand at mixing action and allegory, and his heartfelt depiction of this subject

STRANGE CARGO (1940). With Clark Gable.

only rarely tips the movie into the pretentiousness it constantly threatens to succumb to. There are firm supporting contributions from Peter Lorre, Paul Lukas, Albert Dekker, and particularly Ian Hunter in a virtually unplayable role. Gable is completely in his element as a venal con who believes in nobody and nothing until Hunter and Crawford go to work on him. He is the perfect foil for Crawford, and their teamwork was never before quite as accomplished as it is here.

Crawford's brilliant work in the film must have come as a pleasant jolt even to her most ardent followers. Julie is a character much like Sadie Thompson, and this time Crawford was ready for the challenge. As dictated by Julie's hardships through most of *Strange Cargo*, Crawford is stripped of makeup and haute couture, sporting one ragged, mud-soaked dress for two-thirds of the film. Her performance is similarly unadorned. Gone is the homogenized diction, replaced by a harsh, nasal growl

ideally suited to the sardonic asides she spits at every man who crosses her path. Julie is every bit as tough as the bestial prisoners themselves, and Crawford projects her coarse strength with directness and honesty. The result is the most engaging performance she had yet given.

After she finished picking the sand out of her hair, Crawford returned to her natural habitat, the drawing room, for *Susan and God.* Rachel Crothers' play about a self-centered matron who finds religion and almost loses her family in the process had been a triumph for Gertrude Lawrence on the stage. Susan was a complex and fascinating part, and MGM typically first brought it to Norma Shearer's attention. Shearer's vanity wouldn't permit her to play the mother of a teenage girl, but Crawford's attitude was much more practical. "I'd play Wallace Beery's grandmother if it was a good part," she exclaimed, and eagerly wrapped her talons around the script.

Crawford had never encountered anything like Susan before. Usually Crawford was surrounded by a handful of fascinated men. Here Fredric March is the bone of contention, and Crawford risks losing him to the attractive and more youthful Ruth Hussey. Crawford heroines generally are obsessed with their labyrinthine private lives to the utter exclusion of the outside world. Susan is so absorbed in vague causes and other people's affairs that she completely neglects her duties to her insecure daughter and bibulous husband. Furthermore, Susan is hardly an ingenue; she really marks the chronological point of no return for a glamour star like Crawford.

The script itself is glib and breezy, quite resembling *The Philadelphia Story* in tone. Also, the relationships explored are rather more illicit than the movies usually permitted in 1940. Ruth Hussey's other woman is really the nicest person in the movie, and she is complemented by an assortment of lushes, gigolos, and adulteresses. Despite all these definite points in its favor *Susan and God* loses much of the impact it carried on stage. An excess of rhetorically penned dialogue and theatrical long shots causes *Susan and God* to take on the musty aura of a photographed stage performance, and makes it seem much longer than it really is.

A more fundamental problem is the characterization of Susan herself. Although the part represents an admirable attempt on Crawford's side to widen her acting range, Susan is completely alien to her experience. It's a difficult role to play because while Susan is fundamentally a very irritating charac-

SUSAN AND GOD (1940). With Fredric March.

ter, her considerable failings are supposed to be outweighed by her overwhelming charm. This requires high comedy technique of a very delicate sort, and clearly Cukor worked tirelessly with Crawford to try to achieve it. In response, Crawford raises her voice an octave, articulates every syllable with extraordinary speed and floats about the lush sets with the agility of a hummingbird. She does everything possible to hide her basic down-to-earth quality, but the effort shows—despite her wide-eyed, breathless delivery Crawford simply isn't the sort of ethereal creature called for.

The most important aspect of *Susan and God* was that it led directly to *A Woman's Face* (1941). Cukor had only accepted the casting of Crawford in their previous two films together under a certain amount of protest; now convinced of her abilities, he was eager to direct her in the most challenging role of her career. Adapted from one of In-

grid Bergman's more noteworthy pre-Hollywood vehicles, *A Woman's Face* focused on Anna Holm, a disfigured neurotic who made her livelihood through blackmail and, perhaps, homicide. To make this creature at all credible, Crawford had to divest herself of all the layers of polished technique that she had accumulated over fifteen years in movies, and approach Anna with the directness of a novice. During pre-production rehearsals Cukor really went to work on her, forcing her to repeat whole scenes of dialogue over and over again until she was too drained to delve into her cache of customary mannerisms. With Cukor's aid she delivered a performance that even surpasses *Strange Cargo*, probably the best she has ever given.

Donald Ogden Stewart's scenario is complex in structure and unusually adult in treatment. In a Stockholm courtroom where Anna is on trial for murder, a series of witnesses surrender the puzzle pieces of her sordid career: her unhappy childhood in which her face was horribly scarred by a fire set unintentionally by her drunken father; her turning to extortion as a means of revenge on a world revulsed by her scar; her meeting with the courtly Torsten Barring (Conrad Veidt), whose flattery and charm seduce her into her first emotional involvement.

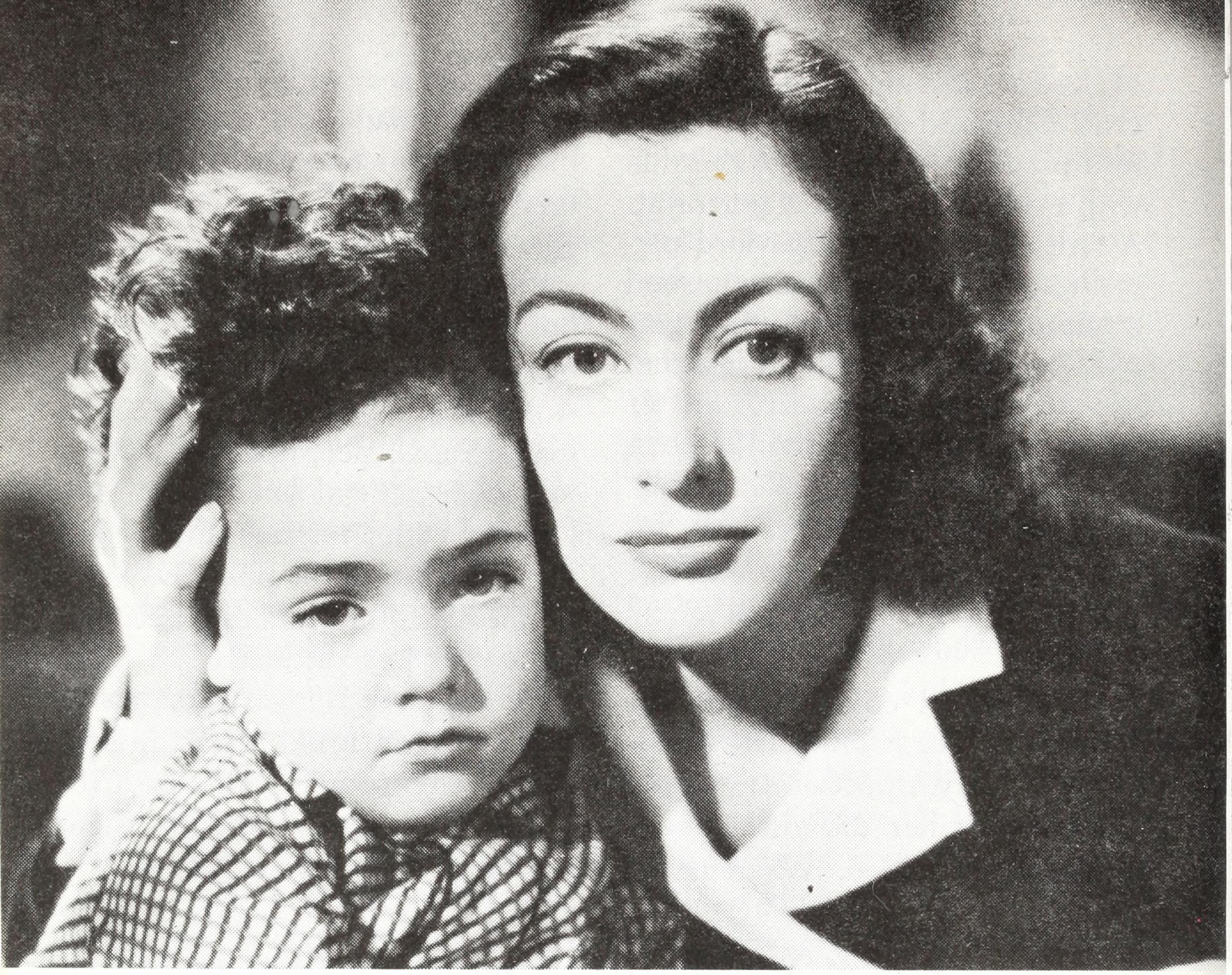
She also meets a sympathetic plastic surgeon (Melvyn Douglas) who successfully removes her scar but cannot erase the lifelong wound festering in her soul. Anna agrees to help Torsten in a scheme to murder his infant nephew so that he can inherit the family fortune. Posing as the child's new governess, she infiltrates her way into the family circle. Under the kindly influence of the family and surgeon Douglas, she drastically changes her outlook, and when Torsten finally attempts to kill the child, she murders the man instead. As the case against her is dismissed, she is comforted again by Douglas, who has fallen in love with the transformed Anna.

A Woman's Face is an uncommonly well-made and suspenseful film and Cukor's greatest visual triumph since Garbo's *Camille*. Nevertheless, it is indelibly Anna's story, and Crawford's performance is a revelation. In bare outline, Anna's background is not unlike that of more standard Crawford heroines. Once more she clawed her way to financial stability and acquired some kitschy pretensions along the way. (Anna is a devotee of the piano, expressing a preference for "most symphonies, some concertos.") She even suffers the usual torment in sorting out her feelings about two very disparate men. However, characters like Sadie

McKee are merely five-finger exercises compared to Anna, and Crawford plumbs the depths of the role with a subtle and chilling portrayal. As in *Strange Cargo*, Crawford lowers her voice to an effective hushed monotone, her understated emphasis giving weight to a script that was strong to begin with. After being complimented by Veidt on her musical talents, Crawford dully sputters, "The Wonder Girl has also tried painting, poetry and alcohol," succinctly conveying the frustration of Anna's whole life.

The special cosmetic job on Crawford's face is hideously realistic, and every aspect of Anna's obsession with her disfigurement is exquisitely detailed. When trying to hide her scar with veils or slouch hats, her unadorned mouth trembles and grimaces almost involuntarily while her eyes dart and glower with insecure defiance toward anyone who pities her affliction. Even potentially bravura sequences, such as the moment when Anna realizes her new face no longer repels people so she can remove her hat and face the sun, are handled with a restraint that makes them all the more powerful. Her performance unavoidably becomes somewhat less distinctive as Anna acquires more human proportions and conventional sentiments. When the reformed Anna proclaims, "I've always wanted to get married . . . to have children . . . I

A WOMAN'S FACE (1941). With Conrad Veidt.



A WOMAN'S FACE (1941). With Richard Nichols.

want to belong to the human race," we are back once more in familiar Crawford territory. But even these rather prosaic scenes are touched by a tenderness and delicacy almost unique for Crawford. It's ironic that she was passed over for an Academy Award nomination for this role, while copping the Oscar itself for her estimable but lesser achievement in *Mildred Pierce* four years later.

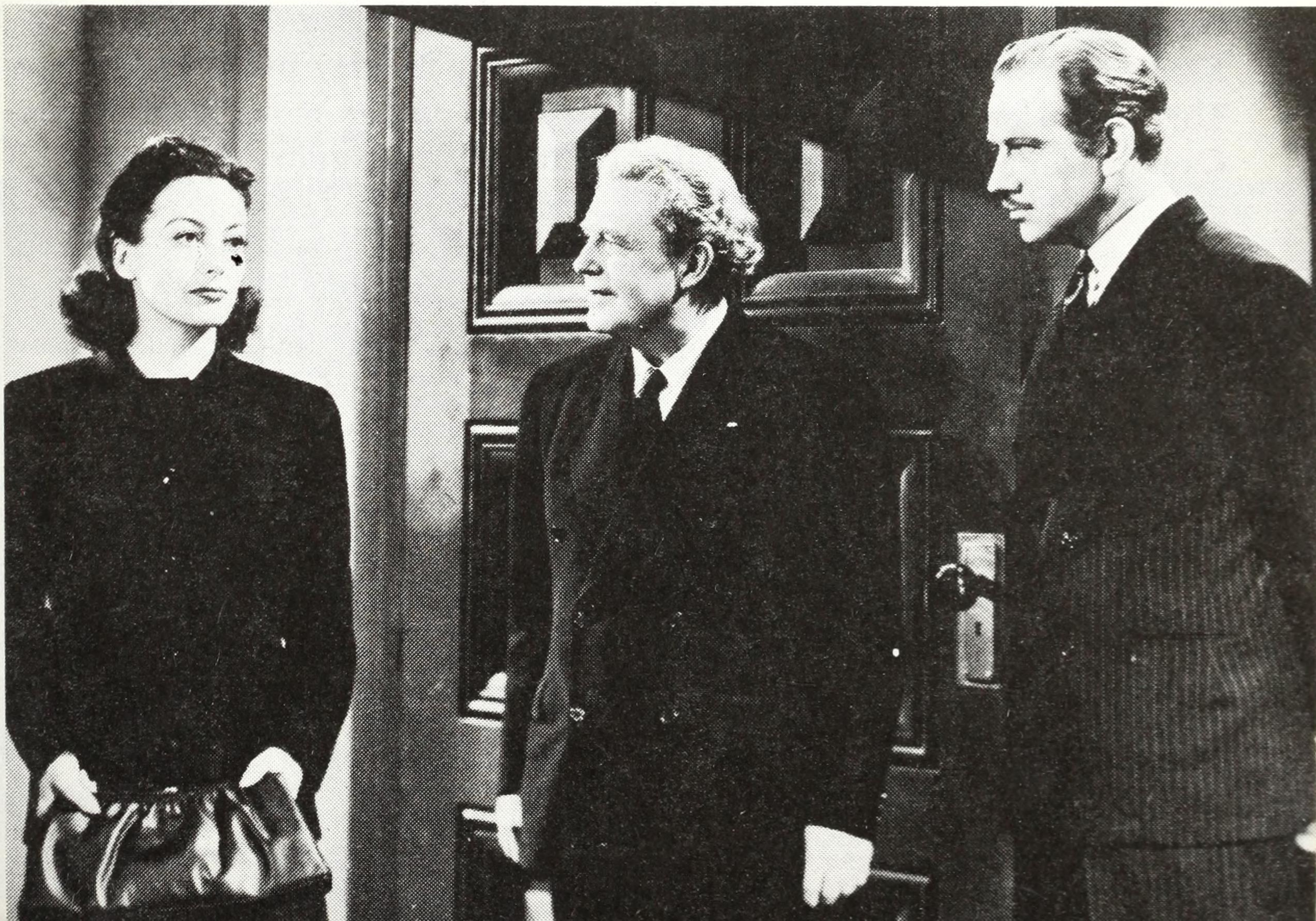
A Woman's Face was more of a *succès d' estime* than a great crowd pleaser, but it reinforced what Crawford had been proclaiming for years. If the days of gaudy sops to the masses were over, so be it; she was now ready for virtuoso character parts that build reputations if not fan clubs.

The unfortunate fact was that roles like Anna Holm came along all too rarely. Crawford's intense dissatisfaction with subsequent assignments prompted MGM to place its once cooperative star on temporary suspension from the studio. Among the projects she refused was the remake of the dated farce *Her*

Cardboard Lover, which eventually served to finish off Norma Shearer's career. Against her better judgment Crawford finally consented to appear in a stilted talkfest called *When Ladies Meet* (1941). Like *Susan and God*, it was based on a Rachel Crothers stage play, only this one had already become a little moldy with age. It had previously been filmed with Ann Harding, Robert Montgomery, and Myrna Loy in the lead roles, and was gabby and tiresome even then. Supplanting these players with Greer Garson, Robert Taylor, and Crawford hardly worked any miracles on the material. Crawford plays a successful novelist with bohemian notions about love, which lead her into an affair with a married man (Herbert Marshall). Her amoral philosophies disintegrate when she meets Garson, her lover's wife. Garson's charm and good sense place Crawford's liaison with Marshall in rather a sordid light, and Joan retreats in disgrace. Luckily Taylor is around to put the pieces back together and make an honest woman of Joan.

Crothers' perennial trump card was to toy with daring ideas while undermining them with cozy platitudes, and this hypocrisy is particularly in evidence throughout *When Ladies Meet*. Fabricated with the usual Metro polish, *When Ladies Meet* sports plenty of attitudinizing but scarcely a single genuine human emotion. In keeping with the scenario, Crawford

A WOMAN'S FACE (1941). With William Farnum and Melvyn Douglas.



WHEN LADIES MEET (1941). With Spring Byington, Robert Taylor, and Rafael Storm.

conveys little of the sincerity she had brought to *A Woman's Face.* Audiences admired her array of high-forties frocks but little else about the film.

Tragic circumstances prompted her move to Columbia for *They All Kissed the Bride* the following year. This typical farce was prepared with Carole Lombard in mind for the lead, but the great comedienne was killed in a plane wreck shortly before production was slated to begin. Mainly as a gesture of condolence to Lombard's widower and Crawford's old friend Clark Gable, Crawford offered to take her place in the film, donating her salary of $112,500 to war-related charities.

Crawford's first romantic comedy in five years, *They All Kissed the Bride* was an unremarkable example of the sort of confection Rosalind Russell specialized in during the early forties. The heroine is a ruthlessly efficient business executive who is softened into conventional femininity by the omnipresent Melvyn Douglas. Although Crawford was to play many such career women under more somber conditions, the giddy treatment of this theme in *They All Kissed the Bride* really clamored for the easy effervescent manner of Russell or Lombard. The movie was a pleasant trifle on the whole, but had little impact on Crawford's career.

She returned to the home lot to find that MGM was still exerting scant efforts to build on her success in *A Woman's Face.* Her next release was *Reunion in France* (1942), a war yarn featuring the predictable

Crawford mélange of spangly outfits and three-cornered liaisons. She impersonates one Michele de la Becque, a frivolous Parisienne who loses everything after the fall of France and gradually becomes a selfless and dedicated fighter for Free France. During the course of the film she hides fallen American flyer John Wayne from the Nazis occupying her house. Although attracted to the stalwart Yank, she remains faithful to old flame Philip Dorn, a seeming collaborationist who is really a double agent for the Allies, and together they await the day when Paris is de-Reiched once and for all.

In the great Metro tradition, *Reunion in France* is diverting enough but riddled with implausibilities. For one thing, Crawford is hardly the world's most convincing Frenchwoman, and despite supposed wartime shortages, she is always gowned in the most sumptuous evening clothes. The script is no more believable; in reality Michele would have been carted off to a concentration camp for some of the nasty things she blurts at the Nazi occupiers. Under these circumstances Crawford strides about exuding cool professionalism if little depth. While neither Dorn nor Wayne lend much authority to their respective roles, Crawford's scenes with Wayne completely fail to ignite any fires; she is much too assertive for the Duke to bully in his customary style.

The war in Europe also provided the painted backdrop for Crawford's subsequent and last vehicle at MGM for a decade. *Above Suspicion* (1943) was not the worst vehicle Crawford ever essayed, but it was certainly one of the least ap-

THEY ALL KISSED THE BRIDE (1942). With Melvyn Douglas.

REUNION IN FRANCE(1942). With John Carradine, Albert Basserman, and Philip Dorn.

ABOVE SUSPICION (1943). With Fred MacMurray and Eily Malyon.

propriate for her talents. Based on a popular novel by the perennial Helen MacInnes, *Above Suspicion* is just another run-of-the-mill spy thriller, shaded with comic marital overtones à la *The Thin Man*. The theme of an American pair sent overseas to unearth the formula for a German secret weapon has been done before and since with distinctly better results. Everything about it is secondhand—one plot climax, the assassination of a Nazi commandant at a concert, is directly stolen from the first version of Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Moreover, Richard Thorpe's laggard pacing makes the material seem even more threadbare than it is.

Crawford is grievously miscast in this one. As a jaunty post-deb from Boston who meets groom Fred MacMurray while studying at Oxford, Crawford is both temperamentally wrong and a decade too old for her role. Everything about the production seems contrived to accentuate the disparity between Crawford and the role she plays. Her hair is worn in ribbons, and topped for plot reasons with the world's most outlandish hat, covered with a rose the size of a cabbage. She is also required at various points to pass as an Austrian lass in a dirndl and an old lady in black widow's weeds, and the result is unintentionally ludicrous. Crawford must have realized the futility of her situation because her performance is astonishingly subdued, as if her mind were anywhere but on the set. In *Above Suspicion* she is completely forgettable, something one could rarely accuse her of.

By this time Crawford had been at MGM for eighteen years, longer than anyone save Lionel Barrymore and Lewis Stone. All of her female contemporaries, including Shearer, Garbo, Loy and MacDonald, had retired or moved elsewhere by 1943, and Crawford began to realize that her career had reached a dead end at the studio which had nurtured her to stardom. Lana Turner had succeeded to the glamour roles once hers by divine right, while the plum dramatic roles she coveted fell to Greer Garson and Irene Dunne. Considering the lackluster box-office returns of her most recent efforts, the studio apparently planned either to dredge up more of the same shaky-A glossies for Crawford or nothing at all. She decided that of these grim alternatives nothing would be preferable, and with a few months to go on her old contract she received her final release from MGM.

It was only a matter of days before Warner Brothers offered her a place on their star roster. Although the salary negotiated was only about one-third of her scale at Metro, she dickered for and won script approval on all future projects, which

was something she had never enjoyed at her old studio. As had occurred so many times in the past, a new Joan Crawford was touted to be on the horizon, even more captivating than the last one. All vestiges of her frayed clothes-horse image were to be banished to the MGM vaults. "I told Mr. Warner," she reported to Sheilah Graham, 'No more namby-pamby pictures. If I have to play the poor little girl who marries the rich guy or the rich girl who marries the reporter I'll scream the place down'."

Presumably she spent the next two years yelling herself hoarse. As the months passed after firming her contract, it became clear that Warners simply had no idea of what to do with her. She was at an age considered problematic for screen actresses, without the histrionic reputation of a Davis or a Colbert to help surmount this barrier. As she turned down one misbegotten script after another, her only screen appearance in 1944 was a cameo in Warners' entry in the all-star patriotic sweepstakes, *Hollywood Canteen*.

With her career in limbo, Crawford had to make do with her secondary vocation as wife and mother. Shortly before leaving Metro she embarked on a short-lived third marriage with tweedy character actor Phillip Terry, best remembered as Ray Milland's brother in *The Lost Weekend*. During this brief match she adopted a second child, a boy named Christopher. She busied herself with her brood and with war-related voluntary activities, and in every way tried to adjust to her enforced inactivity.

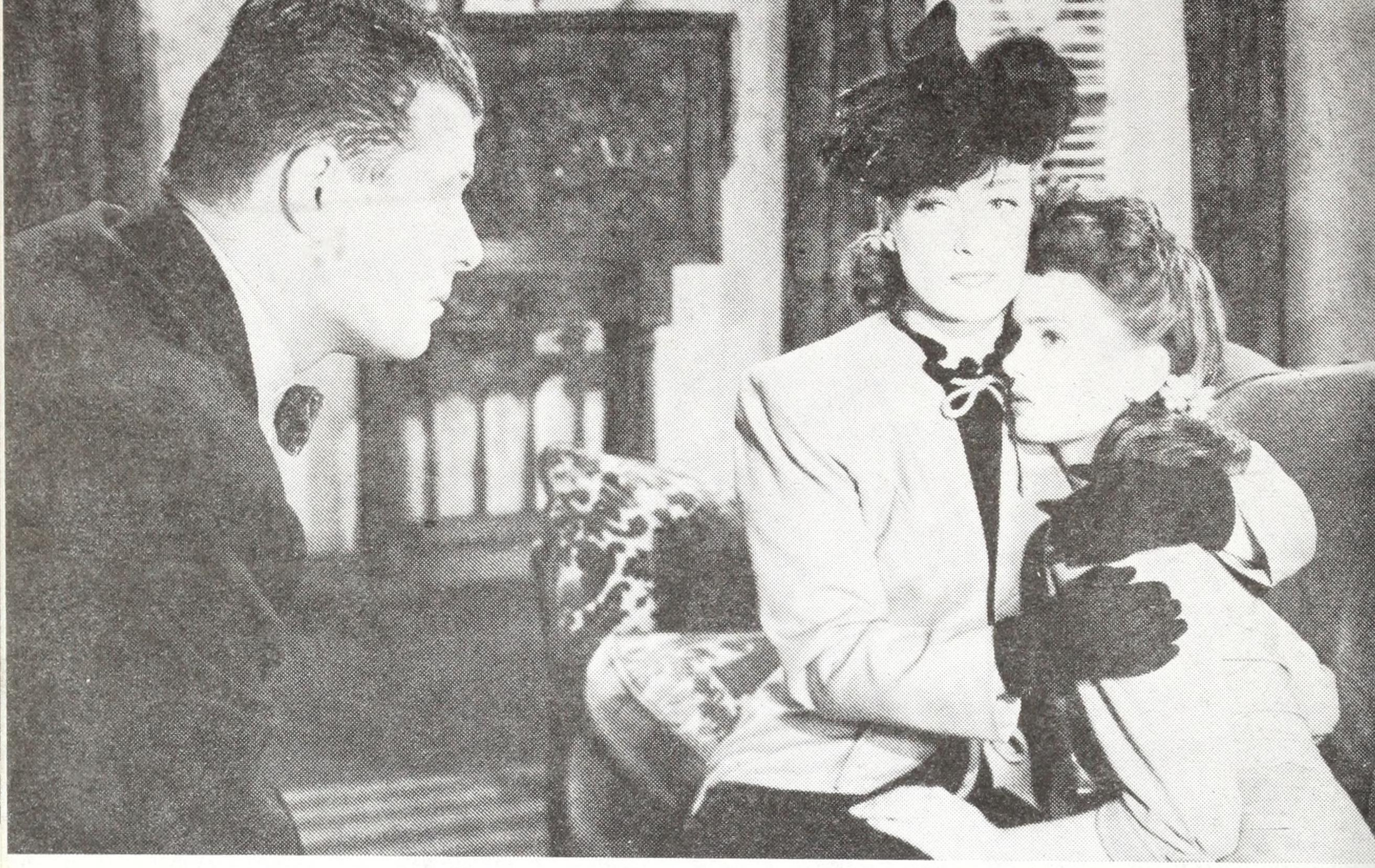
Relief finally came with *Mildred Pierce* in 1945. Oddly enough, she only landed what turned out to be the quintessential Crawford film against the better judgment of practically everyone at Warners. The film version of James M. Cain's popular novel was first offered to Bette Davis, then queen of the Warner lot. When she turned it down, it was handed to Barbara Stanwyck, director Michael Curtiz' choice for the role. Stanwyck was unavailable and in a last-ditch attempt Crawford swallowed her pride and asked to do a test to prove she could play Mildred. Curtiz reluctantly capitulated when he saw the results, although his condescending attitude toward Crawford continued to generate friction between them once the production began.

Mildred Pierce, like other notable Warner films of the period such as *Casablanca* and *Now, Voyager*, is less a genuine work of art than a remarkable filmic summation of the era that produced it. Just as the Bogart film is the ultimate war-time romantic thriller and *Now, Voyager* the tasteful four-hankie "weeper" to

MILDRED PIERCE (1945). With Ann Blyth.

end them all, *Mildred Pierce* is the epitome of the forties woman's melodrama. The grim rewards of mother love was hardly novel subject matter by 1945—audiences had sobbed through *Stella Dallas* and her descendants for decades. The difference was that while Mildred's sorry existence may well be an imitation of life, it is anything but sentimentalized in Ranald MacDougall and Catherine Turney's screenplay. In the sour tradition of forties *film noir*, the viewer's attention is directed more toward the pathology of the savage daughter than to the emotional burden of the martyred parent. This clear-eyed cynicism is what saves *Mildred Pierce* from bathos and makes of it one of the most adroit and fascinating dramas of its time.

Mildred Pierce is a restless middle-class housewife obsessed with the vision of a better life for her children. Her sole purpose for living is to make money and attain the social standing that accompanies it.



MILDRED PIERCE (1945). With Jack Carson and Ann Blyth.

To get what she wants, she leaves her sensible but unambitious husband (Bruce Bennett), slaves her way from hash-house waitress to restaurant-chain proprietress, and marries a louse (Zachary Scott) whose only negotiable credentials are a suave manner and an indelible entry in the Social Register. Contrary to popular folklore, her rapid rise to respectability and riches brings her anything but contentment. The daughter (Ann Blyth) whose aspirations she toiled so hard to fulfill is a vicious and heartless egotist who not only disdains her mother's origins but ultimately shoots her stepfather when he scoffs at her matrimonial ambitions. In the end Mildred is divested of her business, her philandering spouse, and her homicidal offspring. She is finally left where she started—in the sympathetic arms of her first husband, who is a little prosaic, perhaps, but of her own class.

The screenplay is remarkably faithful to the spirit of Cain's novel, streamlining it for dramatic purposes and altering a few secondary plot threads. The most fundamental changes befall the character of daughter Veda, who in the book becomes a celebrated concert singer and successfully entices her stepfather to elope with her. Cain's Mildred is a bit vaguer and more ordinary than Crawford could ever be, but what both Mildreds share is a singlemindedness of purpose that

is both horrifying and fascinating. She is marked by the contradiction of awesome strength of character and devastating emotional vulnerability. Yet what really makes Mildred so compelling is the one fatal flaw in her makeup: her continual submission to her daughter's wishes, which inevitably sabotages any chance for a peaceful life of her own.

It is hard to believe that Mildred was conceived with anyone but Crawford in mind from the beginning. Vital and ambitious but insecure and easily wounded, she was the summation of every role Crawford had ever played. All the essential facets of the various earlier Crawford personae were melted down into a new synthesis through the crucible of *Mildred Pierce*. In confronting a role so congenial to her abilities and experience, Crawford gives a performance of staggering finesse. Every detail of her characterization is delicately underplayed, from her hushed line readings to the eloquently subtle control of those expressive eyes. The Mildred who moans, "I felt as though I'd been born in a kitchen and lived there all my life, except for the hours it took to get married" is not a histrionic martyr, but a believably careworn woman taking canny stock of her life. Even her penultimate confrontation with the ungrateful Veda is conducted with a restraint all the more dramatic for its simmering understatement. Crawford reacts to her daughter's venomous assault with a slap like a whiplash, and a grimace etched in sandstone. She has learned to use her angular face as a mask of stoic endurance. Her mercurial feelings ferment beneath this stolid façade, emanating from her eyes and, seemingly, even the pores of her skin. This constant battle for dominance between her proud self-control and emotional torment is the keynote to Crawford's interpretation of Mildred and all the best work she was to do thereafter.

Crawford's brilliant work is complemented by the protean efforts of an unusually competent production team. The performances all strive toward the highest standards. Zachary Scott is inimitably unctuous as Mildred's aristocratic consort and Eve Arden is her usual sardonic self as her man-wise pal. Best of all is Ann Blyth, who brings the almost incredibly selfish Veda chillingly to life. She is a perfect foil for Crawford—her opaque eyes reflecting nothing but the studio klieg lights, she provides the necessary pyrotechnics opposite Crawford's anguished composure.

The film's smoothness and brio must in large part be credited to its highly professional director, Michael Curtiz. Such previous Curtiz projects as *Yankee Doodle*

Crawford and her "Oscar.

Dandy and *Casablanca* had demonstrated his unerring talent for shaping a story in the most direct and intriguing manner, and *Mildred Pierce* exhibits this ability at its most incisive. Jerry Wald assembled the whole package with his accustomed slickness, and was so pleased with the outcome that he produced all subsequent Crawford pictures at Warners for the next five years.

Mildred Pierce was predictably an enormous financial success, and both Crawford and the film received gratifying notices from the critics. However, Crawford's ultimate accolade came from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which awarded her the 1945 Best Actress Oscar for her work as Mildred. Under any circumstances this tribute would have been exhilarating, but for Crawford the Oscar had particular significance at that moment in her career. Defying those who had dubbed her passé, she was embarking on her third decade in films with a wider audience than ever and renewed respect from reviewers and the movie industry itself. *Mildred Pierce* created a new and timely mold to fashion new Crawford vehicles, which were once more to be crafted with the care afforded her films at Crawford's peak at Metro. At a time when youth and novelty were more highly prized than any other values, Crawford was once again what she had been for over a decade and a half—a first-rank star. She had persisted, waited for the right moment, and struck home with the accuracy of the pro she was. With both an Oscar and Jack Warner in tow, Crawford was apparently indestructible.

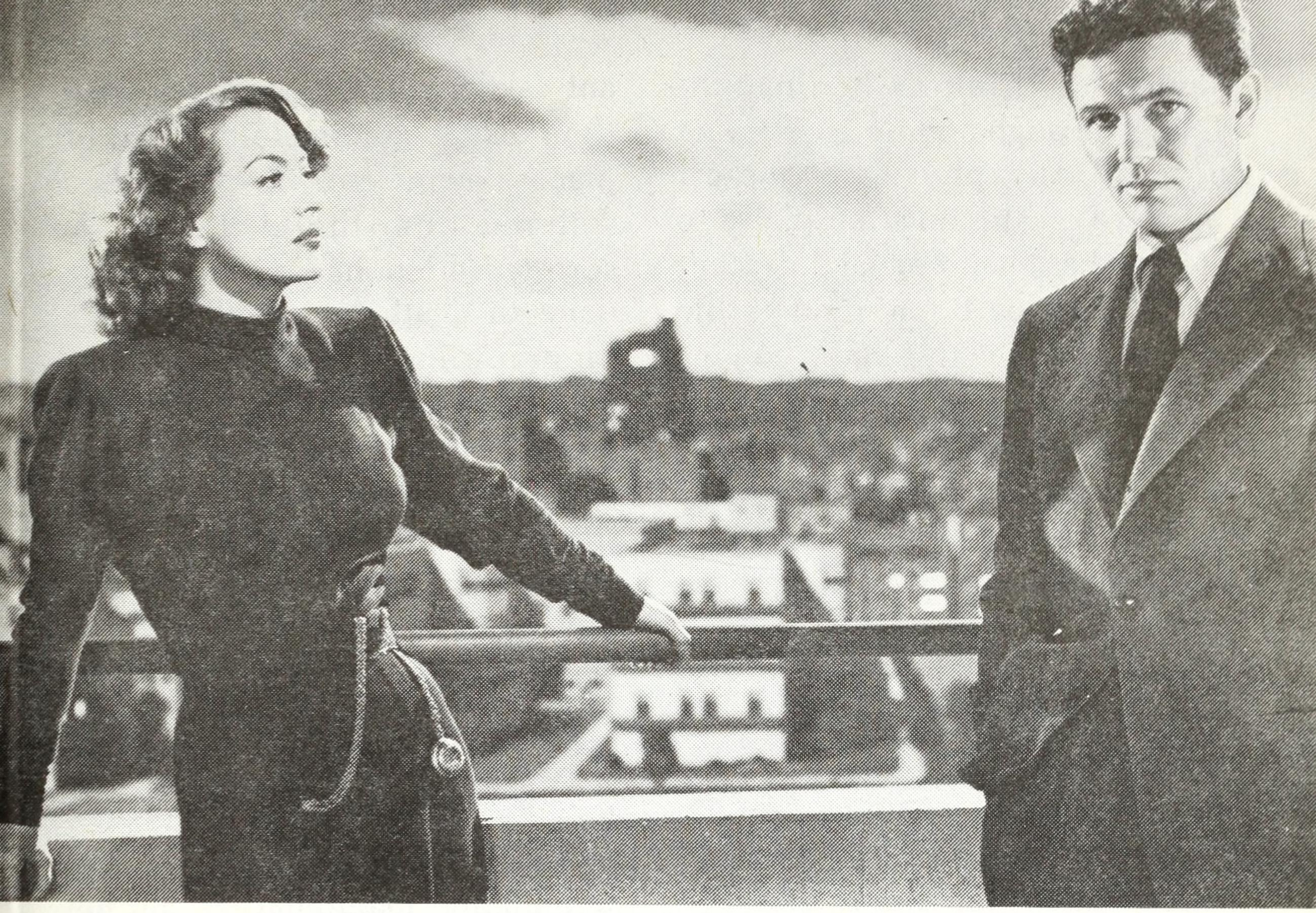
From the summit of *Mildred Pierce* Crawford settled into a comfortable artistic plateau with her next few films. None of them were quite as flawlessly constructed or trend-setting as *Mildred*, but all were at least polished and entertaining, and in the case of *Possessed* rather more than that. Behind her forever were the lamé-draped debutantes and tawdry tarts of yore. The new Crawford was the lacquered woman of a certain age, whose aura of assurance fails to mask her deep-rooted discontent and loneliness. Although seemingly poised to her marrow, she is beset by her basic indecisiveness, the accumulating years, and her unfailing preference for the one man incapable of bringing her any happiness. She overcompensates for her insecurity through a variety of unsavory escape valves, including homicide, alcohol, and/or adultery and as often as not endures untold torment as a result. Past Crawford heroines had suffered in great style as well, but their travails were more due to fatal plot circumstances than their own moral lapses. Mildred's successors bore anguish that was neurotically self-inflicted, wearing their masochism like a bullet-ridden flag of surrender.

The first in this succession of elegantly degraded women was *Humoresque*'s neurotic Helen

CRAWFORD THE INSTITUTION

Wright, whose obsessive nature almost causes the downfall of concert violinist John Garfield. *Humoresque* (1946) was based on a short story by the dowager empress of the tearjerker, Fannie Hurst, and had been filmed once before, back in 1920. This version was adapted by Zachary Gold and Clifford Odets, whose social reformist zeal formed something of an unholy alliance with the lachrymose heart-tuggings doted on by Miss Hurst. The central figure in this melodrama is the mercurial Paul Boray, who struggles from New York's Jewish ghetto to the pinnacle of concert fame. Naturally, his success curdles his already sour personality, and he neglects his slum-bred sweetheart and pastrami-peddling family for the heady world of decadent high society. Ultimately, he comes to his senses, just in time to hold on to his humanity and his talent.

Crawford's role is untypically the secondary one, but by far the most intriguing character in the film. Helen is a wealthy culture monger who provides the means for the violinist's solo debut and later embarks on an extramarital fling with



HUMORESQUE (1946). With John Garfield.

the younger man. Helen is lovelessly married to a middle-aged plutocrat and is besieged by unfocused fears and a sense of worthlessness. She veils these terrors with her brusque air of impenetrable ease and superiority. Yet the mask is all too transparent and what really sustains her life is her dependence on the bottle and a succession of virile gigolos to fill her need for attention and solace. Boray first appeals to her because, apart from his talent, he isn't as easily bought as her previous conquests. Before long, however, she lures him into a rhinestone-studded leash just his size. Both of them become more emotionally involved than they had anticipated, but that only precipitates Boray's decline under her thrall. Realizing that the violinist's deterioration has been largely her doing, Helen makes the first unselfish gesture of her life—she kills herself.

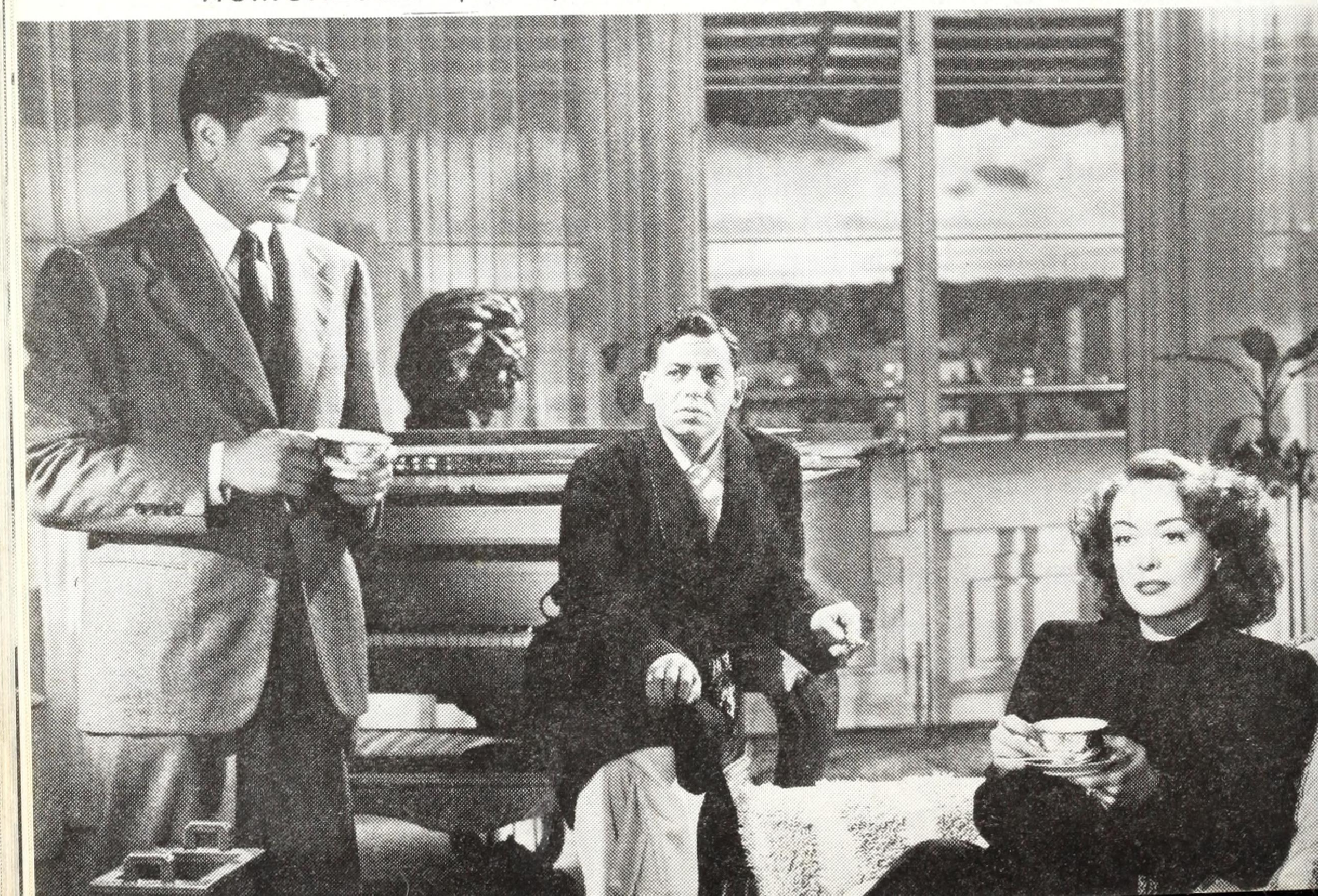
Crawford's performance is extraordinarily persuasive, and in her hands Helen is molded with a real poignance and humanity. As with her Mildred, she maintains an unrelenting tension between Helen's apparent strength and her interior pain until the equilibrium can no longer be borne. Her fingers trembling slightly as she raises the

umpteenth drink to her mouth, gliding through rooms as if trying to avoid any physical contact, Crawford creates an atmosphere so intense that even her fatal descent into the surf as Boray renders the *Liebestod* over the radio seems plausible and even inevitable. She is enormously aided in her task by the superlative camerawork of Ernest Haller, who explores the planes of her face with loving persistence.

Compared to Crawford, everything else about *Humoresque* is rather prosaic. Garfield is skillful as ever, but he had begun to wear out his welcome as the slum graduate with a leaden chip on his shoulder. The other performances range from bland competence to the ponderous monotony of Oscar Levant taking himself more seriously than usual as Garfield's faithful piano-playing crony. All of them suffered from the clichés of the script, which had already been done to death in countless ersatz biographies of underprivileged musical prodigies. Director Jean Negulesco compensates to a degree with a virtuoso display of studio slickness in its most positive sense, although he allows at least twenty minutes of excess footage to hamper the story's dramatic flow.

Crawford definitively crossed the threshold between neurosis and insanity in *Possessed* (1947), her next effort. Helen Wright was tormented and manipulative, but her problems were mere child's play compared to the self-created hell of Louise Howell in *Possessed*.

HUMORESQUE (1946). With John Garfield and Oscar Levant.



POSSESSED (1947). With Stanley Ridges.

Rejected by the one man she really cared for (Van Heflin), her obsession with her estranged lover is so unrelenting that she descends slowly into incoherent schizophrenia. Louise is first seen in an amnesiac coma, wandering the streets of downtown Los Angeles unaware of where or who she is. The only word she can utter is the name of her ex-lover, until she is taken to the city psychiatric ward where the doctors in charge of her case gradually learn the truth of Louise's relentlessly grim past.

A registered nurse by profession, Louise has had to cope both with her hopeless private affairs and the neurotic demands of the chronic invalid under her care. Her demented patient ultimately kills herself, and the long-suffering widower of her charge (Raymond Massey) asks Louise to marry him. She accepts but her attempts to adapt herself are muddled further when Massey's teenage daughter (Geraldine Brooks) accuses Louise of killing her patient in order to take her place. When Heflin and Brooks become romantically involved, Crawford's fragile hold on sanity gives way completely. She lies frantically in order to break up the affair, hears the voice of Massey's first wife, and has visions

of pushing Brooks down a flight of stairs. In a final convulsive fit of jealousy, she actually does kill Heflin with a revolver, precipitating her rapid plummet into total catatonia.

Far more substantial than a soap bubble like *Humoresque*, *Possessed* is one of the more harrowing of the spate of films about psychosis produced during the early postwar years. It admirably refrains from posing any pat answers to the plight of someone like Louise, the implication being that only after long and painful treatment could she possibly return to a semi-normal life. Curtis Bernhardt's helming perhaps lacks the flair for melodrama of someone like Michael Curtiz, but is undeniably assured in its studied way. Bernhardt's adroitness in drawing the audience into Louise's mental state is particularly evident in the sequence of her imagined killing of her stepdaughter; only when it is followed by the actual sequence of events does the audience realize that the murder never really happened.

The contributions of Massey, Brooks, and Heflin are more than adequate, but pale beside Crawford's achievement. Her portrayal of this pathetic creature is nightmarishly graphic and probably her most persuasive acting apart from *A Woman's Face*. Her hysteria is constructed by subtly escalating degrees; it explodes when from her psycho-ward cot she recalls her murder of Heflin and shrieks spasmodically like a child

POSSESSED (1947). With Raymond Massey.

DAISY KENYON (1947). With Henry Fonda.

awakening from the most horrible of bad dreams. This moment is particularly chilling in the fuller context of her history as an actress—it is the one moment in her career when she seems to have completely unleashed the emotions so firmly held in check by her meticulous histrionic technique. Her work garnered her a much deserved Academy Award nomination. The capriciousness of the annual award ritual was never more evident than in 1947, when she lost out in her bid for a second Oscar to Loretta Young for *The Farmer's Daughter.*

Crawford was next loaned out to 20th Century-Fox for a more orthodox assignment as *Daisy Kenyon* (1947). Fundamentally this was a slick updating of Crawford's old three-sided diversions at MGM. In fact, if one substituted Gable for Henry Fonda and Adrian's designs for Charles Le Maire's, *Daisy Kenyon* would be a dead ringer for Joan's 1934 film, *Chained.* In this new mutation of the familiar old species, Crawford portrays a strong and independent Greenwich Village fashion illustrator torn between her visceral attractions to Dana Andrews, a married corporation lawyer, and her more cerebral regard for troubled war veteran Henry Fonda. She marries Fonda, only to have Andrews shed his wife and involve her in a messy divorce suit. After much verbal battling for

DAISY KENYON (1947). With Dana Andrews.

her hand by the two men, she decides to stick by Fonda.

The wonder of *Daisy Kenyon* is how sophisticated and honest this all seems when handled with such style and intelligence. Otto Preminger's *mise-en scène* lends this tattered script a remarkable note of low-keyed sobriety, guiding this triangle with deadly earnestness. Visually the film features some persuasive reconstructions of New York locales, and Leon Shamroy's camera achieves fascinating effects with Crawford's face, treating it rather like an abstract canvas for a study in light and shadow. Andrews and Fonda perform well within the severe limitations of their roles, and Ruth Warrick trots out her cold-blooded helpmate routine from *Citizen Kane* to good effect.

The main difference between Daisy and the girls Crawford exalted in the thirties is that in the end an older and wiser Daisy settles for respect and tranquillity

rather than passion. This more mature Crawford is admirably subdued, striking a convincing balance between worldliness and vulnerability, as in *Humoresque.* However, even she is ill-equipped to cope with such hokum as a climactic car wreck in which the overwrought Daisy overturns her auto and emerges limping just a little before walking through miles of snowy woods back to her cottage. She also has trouble maintaining the illusion that she could ever be an artist, commercial or otherwise. No matter how skillfully she sports her sketchpad and smock, her style is simply too earthbound for that sort of creative activity to seem plausible. Nevertheless, *Daisy Kenyon* proves that a film can be both perfectly foolish and enormously diverting in spite of itself.

Although Warners was eager to keep Crawford busy after her three successive hits for the studio, more than a year passed before her next film appeared in the spring of 1949. Once again the problem lay in finding a script she considered worthy. Ironically, the scenario was the least notable thing about *Flamingo Road,* her next vehicle. It was fortunate that the film reunited Crawford with Michael Curtiz, her talented collaborator on *Mildred Pierce,* whose theatrical vigor imbued some life into the implausible goings-on of the story.

Flamingo Road is a lurid tale of evil doings in high places in a typically movie-decadent Southern town. Performing as a cooch dancer in a tenth-rate traveling carnival, Crawford catches the eye of the town's rising young politico, Zachary Scott, which enrages corrupt county kingpin Sydney Greenstreet. During a stretch in Gladys George's roadhouse bordello, an embittered but ambitious Joan meets Greenstreet's nemesis, David Brian, who offers her matrimony and a mansion on elite Flamingo Road; she accepts both. Disturbed to the point of apoplexy, Greenstreet vents his spleen for Crawford with a series of maneuvers that lead to Scott's suicide, Brian's political ruination, and pariah status for Joan. Finally, she takes her fate in her own hands and, in a struggle to the death with Greenstreet, fatally perforates his formidable hide.

Clearly this aberrant marriage of *Mildred Pierce* and *All the King's Men* can hardly be classified as an earnest exposé of political realities in Dixie, but as a fast-paced exercise in Hollywood Southern Gothic, it is vivid and exciting. Faulkner might have been appalled, but it was right up the alley of the mass audience that doted on melodrama and Joan in equal heady doses.

Crawford strides along *Flamingo*

FLAMINGO ROAD (1949). With Sydney Greenstreet.

Road with the assurance of someone who had trod its pavement all her adult life. After all, this was hardly the first time she had worked her way from waitress wedgies to alligator pumps, or been spurned in love, married on the rebound, and slandered unjustly for nonexistent immoral behavior. Her performance is synthetic but authoritative, which perfectly suits the movie itself. At the same time it was becoming evident that Crawford was perhaps getting a little too old for this sort of thing.

Obviously the studio didn't think so, however. After appearing briefly as herself along with a number of other Warners stars in a Doris Day-Dennis Morgan-Jack Carson musical entitled *It's a Great Feeling*, Crawford launched into *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950), another retread of the same genre. This one once more relies on *Mildred Pierce* for inspiration, as well as borrowing from *Flamingo Road*, which was derivative to begin with. Like *Mildred Pierce*, *The Damned Don't Cry* begins with the unsolved murder of a despicable man, the clues to which are unraveled in a flashback on Crawford's sorry life. Joan plays a lower-class housewife who leaves her tank-town husband and becomes in-

volved with two men: a gangster-politician (David Brian) who sets her up as a phony society lady to front for his shady schemes, and his arch-rival in the underworld (Steve Cochran), whom she really loves. Caught between these two violent men, she unwittingly lays the groundwork for Brian's murder of Cochran, and is eventually wounded herself by her former lover before the federal agents get him.

This saga of a woman's rise from woebegone rags to even sorrier riches is obvious and more than a little silly, but Crawford does her best by it. With her face greased to simulate an absence of makeup, her shabby clothes, dulled eyes and monotonal voice, Crawford almost convinces as a bedraggled hausfrau. The later scenes cause her more difficulty. Now over forty, Crawford is never quite credible as the clothes-horse whose cheap allure draws whistles from the most jaded of buyers. The incongruity is even more apparent during her passionate interlude with the much younger Steve Cochran; the script is written and directed as though there were no disparity between them whatever. Through it all, Crawford relies on her emphatic delivery and tight-lipped stares to get her through, implying all along that she is really much classier than this trash she has to put across.

THE DAMNED DON'T CRY (1950). As Ethel Whitehead.

Crawford next moved to Columbia for a much more rewarding assignment as *Harriet Craig*, a woman whose obsession with an orderly house ultimately drives its other inhabitants screaming into the street. This was the third screen version of George Kelly's celebrated play, and is really quite superior to the well-remembered 1936 rendition featuring Rosalind Russell. Crawford is both chronologically and temperamentally better suited to the role than Russell had been; also, the longer running time of the 1950 version permits a more fully rounded delineation of this rather forbidding creature.

Harriet's systematic campaign to bend everyone's will to suit hers is anything but subtle, yet it is smoothly delineated by Vincent Sherman, who was far more adroit at this sort of material than the gory excesses of *The Damned Don't Cry*. In *Harriet Craig*, Crawford's external toughness is no mere façade for her secret unhappiness—she is hard as granite to the core. Imperious with the servants, manipulative with her family, and neurotically fixated on her expensive knick-knacks, she has not one redeeming human feature. Her rationale for marriage is strictly mercenary; her creed dictates that "marriage is a practical matter—a man wants a wife and home, a woman wants security."

She is so blatantly calculating that

HARRIET CRAIG (1950). With Wendell Corey.

GOODBYE, MY FANCY (1951). With Robert Young.

at first it seems incredible that even a stooge like her put-upon husband (Wendell Corey) would swallow her routine for so long. The reason is simple, though too gamy for inclusion in the more reticent 1936 version. What clearly cements this marriage is Crawford's prowess in fulfilling her matrimonial duties. Her sexual wiles are obvious but effective, but once the husband finally gets wise to Crawford's trickery, he realizes how barren even her erotic ploy has been, muttering, "You lie when you cry, you lie when you smile, you lie when you—" This, of course, is the last straw, and he takes his final leave from this gilded mausoleum and its remote-controlled caretaker.

Even when abandoned by her spouse, Harriet's emotions never surface, because she has none to expose—losing a husband is merely inconvenient and a blow to her pride. At the end of the 1936 version, Russell sniffles and suffers and belatedly learns her bitter lesson. Crawford simply dries her forced tears, extinguishes the downstairs lights, and regally ascends the staircase to her satin-lined bedroom, finally having gotten the house entirely to herself.

The one flaw in Crawford's performance is that it lacks variety —she is relentless and castrating almost beyond belief. Nevertheless, this is an impressive achieve-

ment in the realm of star acting, and *Harriet Craig* was one of the best showcases for her aggressive style that she was to find in the early fifties.

On her return to Warners, she landed her most prestigious assignment since *Possessed*–the lead in the film version of Fay Kanin's Broadway success, *Goodbye, My Fancy*. Madeleine Carroll had been lauded on the stage as the wistful congresswoman who returns to her alma mater to relive some bittersweet memories. Crawford strove mightily to outshine the incandescent Carroll, but much of the role lay somewhat outside her usual range. This was one of her rare films to deal in even semi-controversial philosophical issues, and Crawford seems a bit uneasy defending intellectual freedom versus gray-flannel conformity on the campus.

Apart from the fact that the script at least touched upon certain cerebral matters, it called for a wry sense of comedy in parrying the heroine's conflicting romantic entanglements. Crawford's attack is rather too emphatic to convey the

THIS WOMAN IS DANGEROUS (1952). With Dennis Morgan.

lightness such material requires. Her difficulties are particularly apparent in the film's early sequences, when she tussles a bit ponderously with Frank Lovejoy as a photojournalist who has been shadowing her for years. The low point is reached soon thereafter when Crawford revisits her old college digs after twenty years, and reacts with a moistness more appropriate to Scarlett O'Hara trekking back to the plantation. Once Crawford is reunited with Robert Young, her collegiate sweetheart turned university president, she is back on sentimental terra firma and begins to deliver in her customary assured style.

Very little of *Goodbye, My Fancy*'s substance was altered for the screen, other than expanding it from the one-room confinement of the stage production. The result is smooth and literate but a little too dependent on talk. On his third consecutive Crawford vehicle, Vincent Sherman shapes the material competently enough, but the more inventive touch of a real stylist like George Cukor might have enlivened the proceedings considerably. One of the film's assets is its rather forthright liberal backbone for a movie produced amid the McCarthy hysteria of the early fifties. Merely to have advocated the right of a somewhat leftist teacher to maintain his beliefs and keep his post, as the congresswoman does, must have seemed rather daring in 1951. *Goodbye, My Fancy* also boasts an able cast, most notably Eve Arden once more wallowing in irony as Crawford's girl Friday and Lurene Tuttle as the tittering wife of the school's most Babbitty trustee. Robert Young manages to endure losing Crawford to Lovejoy with calm equanimity, but then he had had so much practice—having suffered the same fate thrice back in the thirties. Still, *Goodbye, My Fancy* is never as engrossing as it might have been, and met with a tepid response from critics and audiences.

For all *Goodbye, My Fancy*'s deficiencies, much worse was in store for Crawford with *This Woman Is Dangerous*, which incorporates the worst aspects of *The Damned Don't Cry* and then compounds the felony by slapping on a thick layer of gore and hokum. Once again Crawford is David Brian's classy gun moll, whose chic and polish gain her entree to the high-toned watering spots that Brian's gang larcenizes. A touch of *Dark Victory* is tossed in as Crawford falls victim to severe headaches and failing vision, necessitating surgery at the hands of the country's foremost specialist in the field (Dennis Morgan). Predictably she falls for him even before she can see him too clearly,

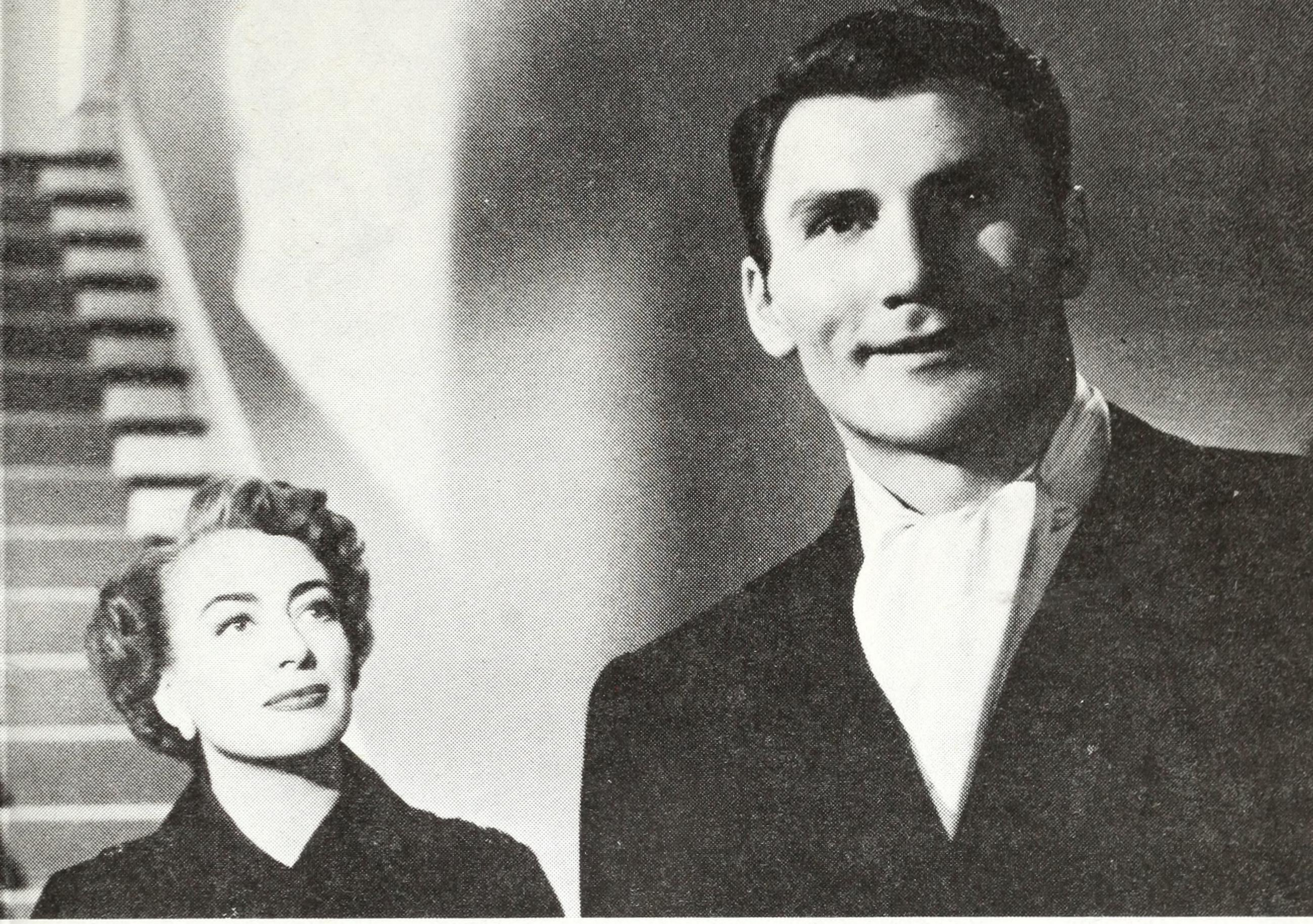
and attempts to rehabilitate herself into a conventional spouse for his sake. Unfortunately Brian won't relinquish his hold on her, and the film climaxes with this thug invading Morgan's operating theater in order to finish him off. Crawford nobly blocks the bullet, and is sent to prison for a brief stretch in payment for her past peccadilloes, solaced by the knowledge that Morgan will be waiting at the prison gates when she is released.

Everything about *This Woman Is Dangerous* is irredeemably shoddy and clichéd, and for a major studio product like this, the film is also very carelessly made; incongruous details, such as palm trees visible on a street supposedly in Indiana, crop up throughout the movie. Felix Feist's direction plods and he elicits drab performances from almost everyone. The only exception is Crawford, whose immutably regal presence provides the only verve the film possesses. Yet even she relies increasingly on overly familiar mannerisms at the expense of her genuine gift for characterization.

Thus in 1952 Crawford was embroiled in her worst career crisis since the grim days before *Mildred Pierce*. Realizing this recent string of meretricious flops was fast propelling her into oblivion, she obtained a release from her contract at Warners. Following the pattern of most major stars by the early fifties, Crawford was now a free-lance performer, which denied her the security she had always enjoyed as a contract player but substituted the chance to choose from a wider variety of screen material, directors and co-stars.

Fortunately, her extraordinary instinct for survival bailed her out of this critical low point as it had so many times before. Her first effort under this new arrangement was *Sudden Fear* (1952), a superior thriller and her biggest hit in years. There was nothing basically innovative about the story—literally dozens of films had pivoted on this psychotic-husband-tries-to-kill-and/or-drive-loony-his-unsuspecting-spouse routine. Yet derivative as it is, *Sudden Fear* is remarkably fresh and suspenseful, breathing new vitality into a tired genre.

Crawford plays a San Francisco heiress and successful Broadway playwright, who decides the lead actor chosen for her new play doesn't have the requisite romantic quality, and fires him a few days before opening night. The disappointed actor (played by Jack Palance) just happens to be on the train returning Crawford to California after the play's premiére, and during the journey she falls for him completely. Soon after their marriage the sultry Gloria Grahame hits town; she too is wed-



SUDDEN FEAR (1952). With Jack Palance.

ded to Palance, and together they plot to do away with Crawford and inherit her fortune. Their intended victim learns of the plan just in time, and she calls on all her dramatist's wiles to devise a counterplot which will result in Palance's death rather than hers. However, Crawford isn't cold-blooded enough to go through with it, and the film climaxes with a bone-chilling chase through night-shrouded San Francisco with Palance as the hunter and Crawford the quarry.

Everything about the film is polished and craftsmanlike from Elmer Bernstein's lovely score through the atmospheric photography, the taut script, and David Miller's accomplished direction. The harrowing last three reels are preceded by the slow and deliberate buildup of a palpable aura of unrelenting tension. While Crawford cowers unseen in Palance's closet, the audience's fear of her being trapped by her murder-bent husband is milked with cruel artfulness. An especially effective tool in the director's hands is the use of amplified noises: the phone ringing in Palance's apartment, Crawford's hysterical sobs while hiding from her assassin, the screech of the cat she steps on while fleeing from him on a rickety balcony.

SUDDEN FEAR (1952). As Myra Hudson.

Ultimately Palance spots Grahame running toward him in the same white kerchief worn by Crawford, as Joan had anticipated. He hurtles his car mistakenly at Gloria and slaughters both her and himself. The final shot is undiluted catharsis in the best Crawford fashion, as the camera follows her catatonic face as she leaves the accident. Gradually she removes the scarf from her head, and it floats down the gutter in the street. As the camera continues to follow her, she continues walking, her face relaxed and at peace for the first time. As the scene fades, she is seen alone in the distance, trudging back to her home atop a San Francisco hill.

Crawford is ideally cast as this

tormented woman in love with a worthless man much younger than she, and her performance is vigorous and sympathetic. This portrayal is studded with technically superlative moments; in one instance, the suspicious Joan allows her intended killer to kiss her, and as his face crosses hers her expectant smile changes startlingly to a repulsed grimace within a matter of seconds. Better still, Crawford makes one care for the fate of the character she plays, something she hadn't worked very hard at achieving in some time. Lacking this, the crucial element of suspense necessary to material like *Sudden Fear* would have evaporated completely.

The success of *Sudden Fear* greatly benefited Crawford's career. Apart from its critical and popular acclaim, she garnered her third Oscar nomination. Once again she had whisked the cobwebs off her stellar image and created a fresh demand for her talents. The immediate result was something Crawford had been aiming toward for nearly a decade: an offer to return in style to MGM. The opportunity came with *Torch Song* (1953), which was also her first all-color film and the first full-scale musical outing she had ventured in twenty years. Her return to the scene of the first eighteen halcyon years of her career was greeted by such old friends and collaborators as Gable and Astaire, as well as Dore Schary, who had long since replaced L.B. Mayer, Crawford's champion at Metro.

Torch Song tells the predictable saga of a great star of the musical theater, whose ruthless egotism alienates everyone around her. Naturally, her abrasive manner only obscures her own loneliness and fear of growing old without love and emotional security. She meets her temperamental match in a blind piano accompanist, played by Michael Wilding, whose bland tolerance of her excesses belies a strength of character far outweighing hers. Although she fights her growing attraction to this man, a romance buds between them, and Crawford gradually becomes humanized under his influence, adding personal fulfillment to her career trophies.

Torch Song was made on a relatively small budget and a rapid shooting schedule, and is surprisingly intimate for an MGM musical effort. Director Charles Walters had previously created such delightful Metro confections as *Easter Parade* and *Lili*, and his touch is smooth and stylish. Yet his skills fail to bolster the threadbare plot, and the film plunges sporadically into a vulgarity unusual for his films. Most of the public interest in *Torch Song* centered around


TORCH SONG (1953).
With Henry Morgan.

Crawford's attempts to cope with the demands of the musical requirements of the script, after so many years in undiluted drama. The result was a draw both for Crawford and her fans. She pirouettes through the dance sequences with the assurance of her straight histrionic moments, commanding the audience to believe she is another Gertrude Lawrence against all evidence to the contrary. Yet Crawford still shows no greater basic affinity for theatrical choreography than she had in *Dancing Lady* back in 1933. She is also burdened by some particularly tasteless material, including one lulu of a production number entitled "Two-Faced Woman," in which she impersonates a lustful mulatto in black wig and brown face. And if audiences felt that her singing voice didn't really sound like Crawford, the conjecture was justified; the songs were dubbed by India Adams.

Crawford was next slated to move over to Paramount for the leading role in *Lisbon*, a cold-war thriller, but the script proved unsalvageable and the project was shelved. Instead she found herself on horseback in the Republic corral

TORCH SONG (1953). With Michael Wilding.

for the idiosyncratic *Johnny Guitar* (1954). One of the oddest Westerns ever made, *Johnny Guitar* is, to say the least, the most unusual Crawford vehicle of the fifties. Directed with jangling intensity by Nicholas Ray, the film is one sagebrush saga in which the men are peripheral love objects for a change and the dramatic conflict flares instead between two female firebrands. Other strange touches include the all-pervasive air of fifties Freudianism running riot throughout the film, and the fact that this is one Western where most of the action takes place indoors, within the confines of Crawford's gambling saloon.

Crawford is Vienna, an iron-willed individualist who has built her temple of amusement aided by nobody but herself. She stalks about in black levis with a holster slung over one hip, is an excellent shot, and doesn't hesitate to show it when the necessity arises. Her adversary is Mercedes McCambridge as Emma Small, a staunch moralist and cattle baroness who loathes everything Vienna stands for. Basically their conflict hovers around that old bugaboo, sex—Mercedes' id finds an outlaw called the Dancin' Kid (Scott Brady) irresistible, while her super-ego is repulsed by it all and demands the annihilation of both him and Vienna, his sometime mistress. The title role, played by Sterling Hayden, is rather peripheral; he is Crawford's one emotional weakness, a former lover who jilted her and has now been hired to play in her establishment. Basically he is on hand to provide a sounding board for Crawford's emotions, and to save her from a lynch mob after disappearing rather curiously from the scene for a couple of reels. The plot meanders in all sorts of directions until the climactic gunfight between Crawford and McCambridge, from which Crawford emerges with a flesh wound and McCambridge winds up dead. At this point Crawford retrieves Hayden and together they wander off into the fading sunset.

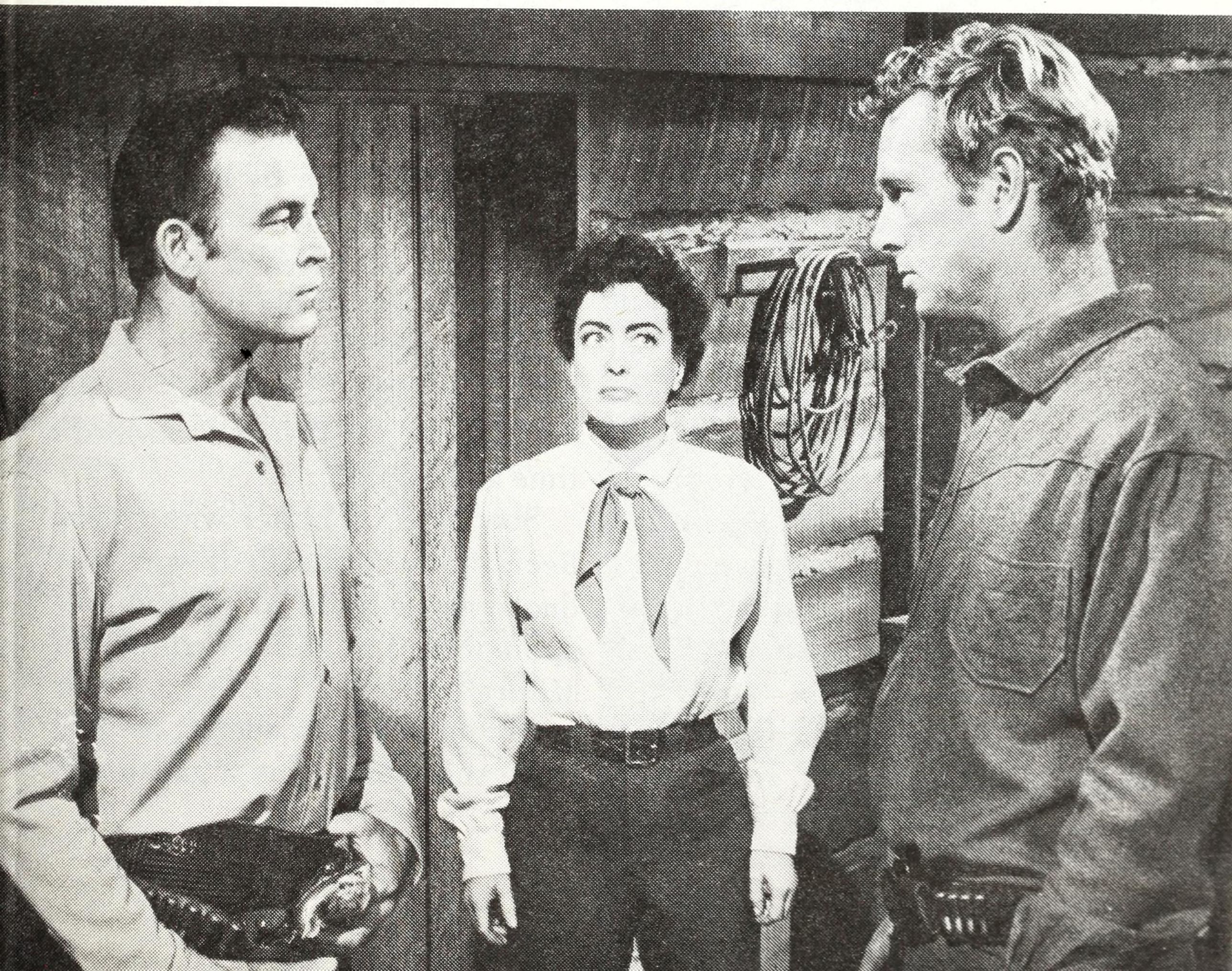
Crawford is at her grande-dame best as Vienna, biting out her lines as if they were cartridge shells. Like Barbara Stanwyck, who played a number of such roles in the fifties, Crawford's assertive stance perfectly suits the code of the Hollywood Western, and *Johnny Guitar* turned out to be a far more effective change of pace for her than the more highly touted *Torch Song*. In many respects her performance is extremely contemporary, particularly in its direct and honest approach to female sexuality. In her relations with the two men in her life, Vienna not only clearly enjoys her affairs of the flesh, but is often quite aggressive in initiating them.

Yet the most compelling relationship in the film consists of the kinky enmity between Crawford and McCambridge. The latter's edgy Method approach provides an illuminating contrast to Crawford's richly mannered stellar emoting. *Johnny Guitar* was apparently a case of kitsch imitating life, as Crawford and McCambridge's screen exercises in mutual bloodletting were paralleled by only slightly less violent fracases between the two behind the scenes.

Johnny Guitar has become something of a cult film among French film intellectuals; Truffaut even went so far as to include an elaborate homage to the film in his own *Mississippi Mermaid.* Although it is hardly as poignant or profound as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the like have proclaimed it to be, *Johnny Guitar*'s absurdities and excesses make it far more enjoyable than many less stylized and more rational Westerns.

In the following year, Crawford twice returned to standard modern-day fare with far less gratifying results. The first of these contemporary outings was a rather silly pseudo-thriller called *Female on the Beach* (1955). Crawford walks briskly through her well-worn paces as a lonely, mature woman

JOHNNY GUITAR (1954). With Scott Brady and Sterling Hayden.



FEMALE ON THE BEACH (1955). With Jeff Chandler.

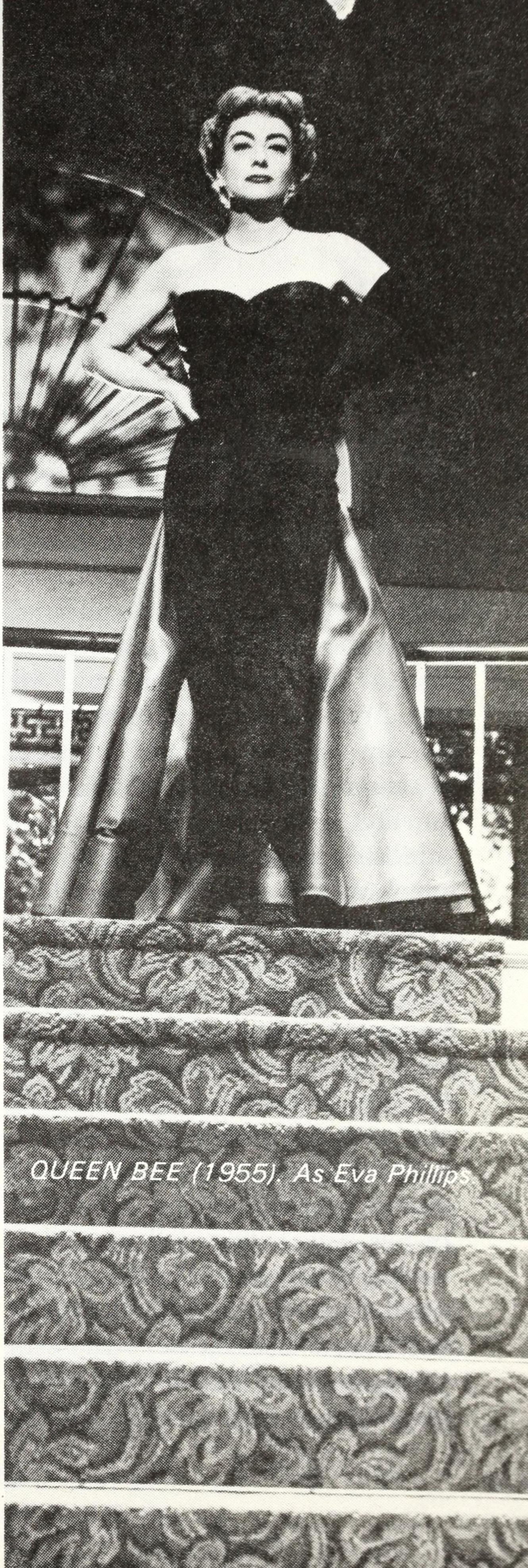
trapped in her usual quandary between sense and sensuality. A widow newly installed in a California beach house, her reason tells her that a shifty and snarling gigolo like Jeff Chandler can only be counted on to cause trouble of the most agonizing sort. After all, didn't his previous paramour end up at the bottom of the steps to that very same cottage with her neck mysteriously broken? And yet, Joan's less cerebral drives are hard-put to resist Chandler's burly charms. Hence Chandler spends most of the picture snarling with his shirt off, while Crawford alternately clinches his torso tightly to hers and pushes the beast away with all her imperious might. Of course, all ends well when Joan realizes that his baseness has been tempered by love at last and that he has mended his amoral ways. And it turns out that Chandler's ex was really done in by love-starved real-estate agent Jan Sterling, whom Jeff had spurned. *Female on the Beach* was all too typical of the turgid mediocrity churned out regularly by Universal in the fifties, and hardly worthy of Crawford's time and trouble.

She fared no better with *Queen Bee* (1955), although it was produced and written by the men responsible for her triumph in *Mildred Pierce*. This time their combined efforts rendered nothing more substantial than a garish car-

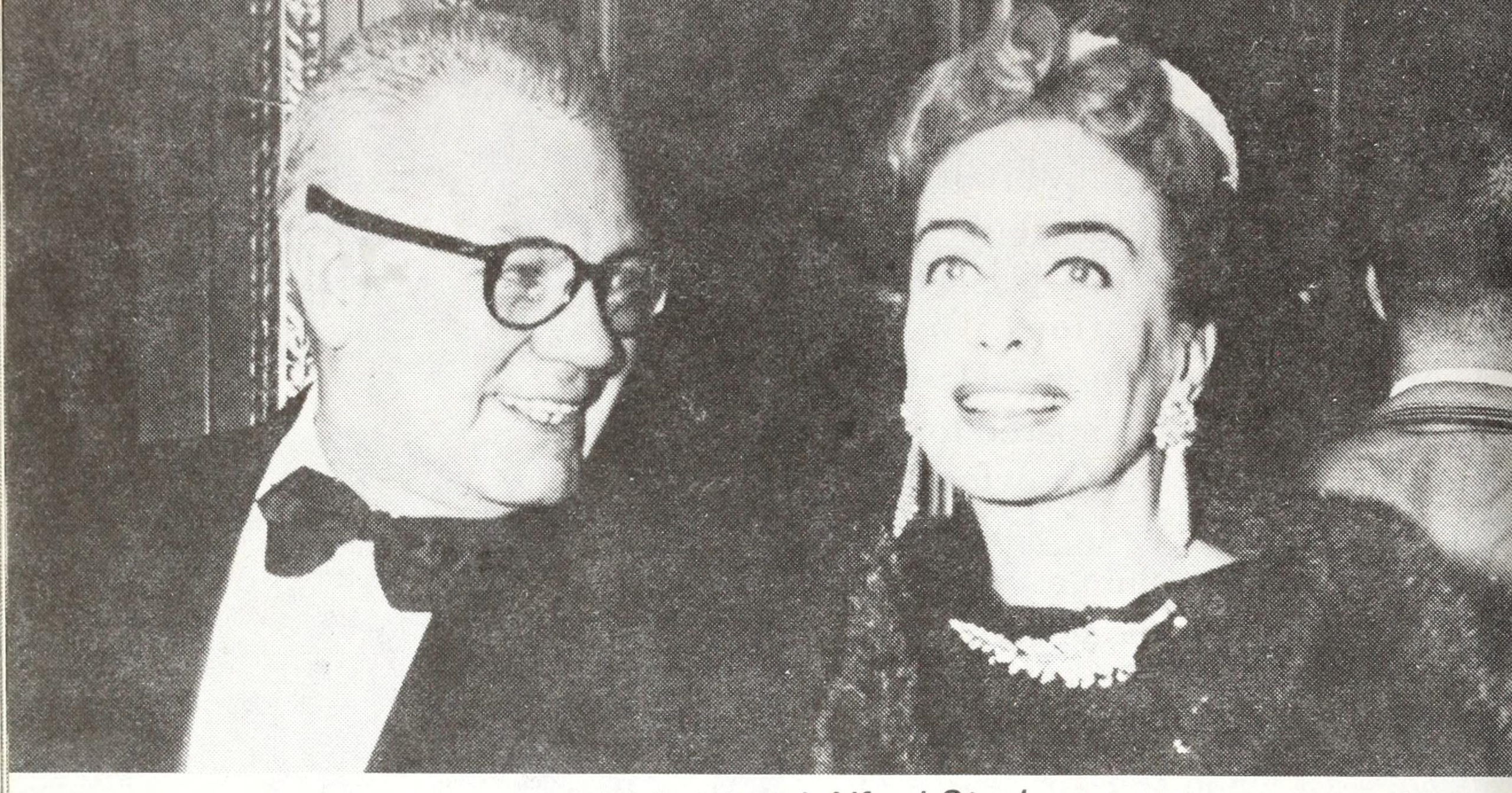
toon refurbishment of *The Little Foxes*, complete with thwarted love affairs, magnolia-hung Southern manses, and suicides by hanging and auto conflagrations. Sadie Thompson was subtle and Harriet Craig a living doll compared to the monster played by Crawford in *Queen Bee*. This seraph goads her weakling husband into a perpetual alcoholic stupor while she carries on with the foreman of the estate and induces poor naïve Betsy Palmer to kill herself when the girl learns of Joan's illicit dealings with the man she loves. Joan's partner in sin finally gets rather shaken up by her assorted displays of bitchery, and does everyone a favor by driving both of them over a rocky cliff.

Ranald MacDougall directed as well as wrote *Queen Bee*, which of course only made things worse. Crawford is hardly less transparent than the character she portrays, but far too much a pro to allow all those bogus motivations to interfere with her accustomed poise. At odd moments the heady script mesmerizes her into performing strange feats of histrionic daring: at one point she expresses her pique by smearing cold cream all over the image of her agonized face reflected in her vanity mirror.

Nineteen fifty-five was a rather more significant year for Crawford personally than it had been professionally. In that year she married



QUEEN BEE (1955). As Eva Phillips.



With husband Alfred Steele.

Alfred Steele, president and later Chairman of the Board of the Pepsi-Cola Corporation, and for the first time subordinated her career as film star to another vocation—that of the polished corporate wife. Steele's responsibilities required him to spend much of his time spanning the globe to promote Pepsi and the new Mrs. Steele accommodated her schedule to his with relish. During the next few years, Crawford trekked to Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East, having found both the most compatible marriage she had ever had and a new interest almost as stimulating as her movie career. This hectic idyll was to last under four years, ending with Steele's death in 1959. Crawford was later to describe her years with Steele as the most fulfilling period of her life.

One of Steele's legacies to Crawford was an abiding enthusiasm for the world of corporate affairs. Shortly after his demise, Crawford's indefatigable energy and dedication were acknowledged by Pepsi-Cola through a lifetime appointment to the company's board of directors. Her expertise gathered from decades spent promoting herself into the public eye has proved an invaluable public relations aid to the company, and Crawford continues to this day to devote most of her time to the greater glory of Pepsi.

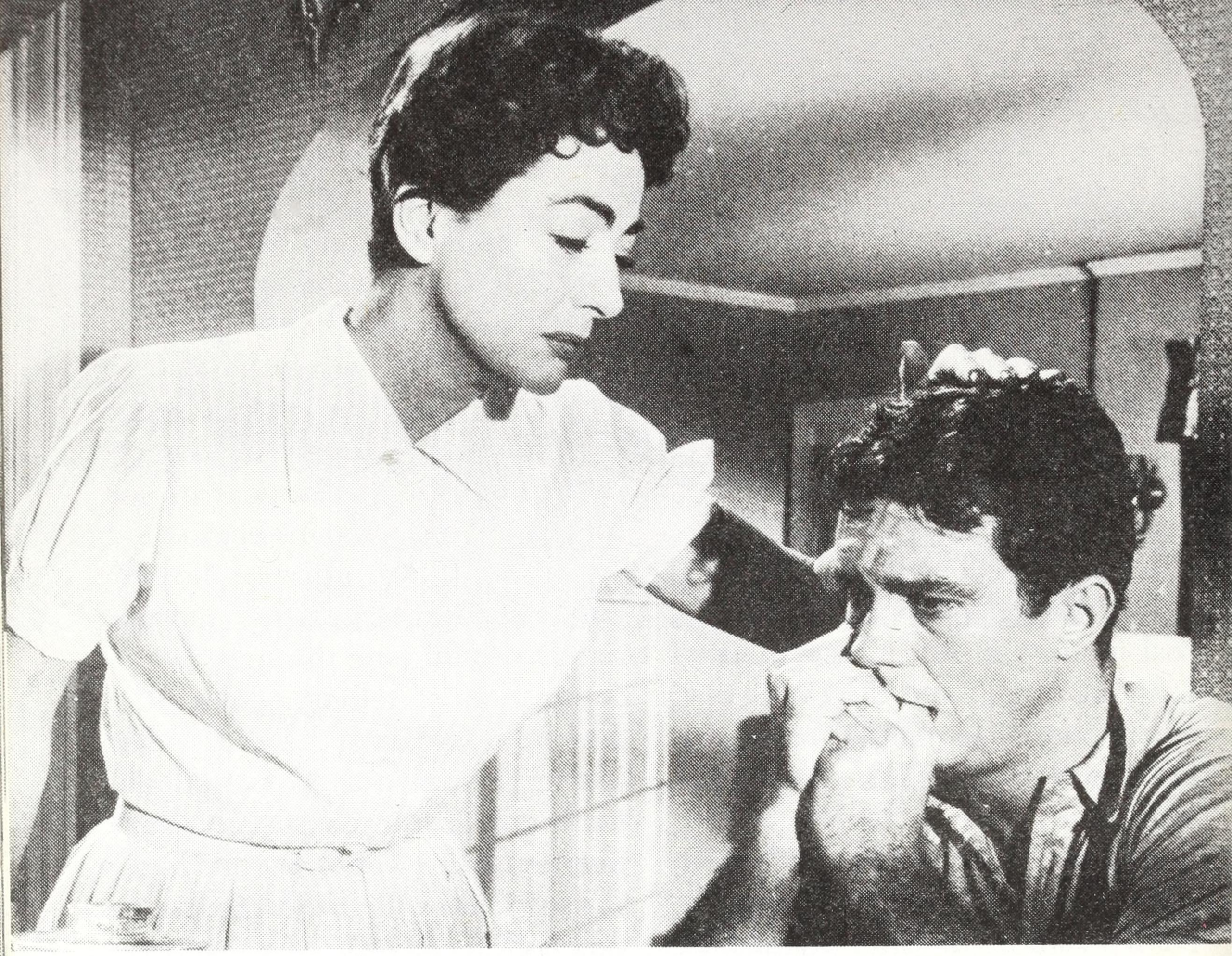
However, these activities have only complemented her perennial determination to remain before the camera. Even during her marriage to Alfred Steele she managed to appear in two films, which served as her valedictory appearances in romantic heroine roles. *Autumn*

Leaves, released in 1956, is a disturbingly flawed but compelling study of the pitfalls of lonely spinsterhood. It presents Crawford at her most sympathetic as a shabbily genteel typist whose emotional life is as drab as the bungalow court she inhabits. Her dimming hopes for a more fulfilling life are revived when she meets Cliff Robertson, a young man who is clearly emotionally disturbed in some way but who is also the first male to show any real interest in her in years. After their marriage, she discovers that Robertson is not merely immature but a pathological liar and a kleptomaniac.

His condition worsens when he confronts his father and ex-wife, both unknown to Crawford, whose interest in each other transcends the usual restrictions of filial love. When Robertson's paranoia intensifies and he brutally attacks her, she is forced, after all, to commit him. A psychiatrist warns Joan that his attraction to her may be a function of his mental imbalance, and admonishes her not to place too much faith on a reconciliation when he recovers. The doctor's suspicions prove unfounded when Robertson is finally released, and is eager to return to Joan and their life together.

Most of the plot structure of *Autumn Leaves* rests shakily on the theme of the mental deterioration of the Robertson character, posing some rather simplistic explanations for his distress. (Supposedly, most of his problems stem from having witnessed his wife and father copulating in his bed.) Director Robert Aldrich wisely shifts the dramatic focus to the more complex character of his aging second wife, and his sensitive treatment of her predicament is the most engrossing aspect of this otherwise hollow film. Aldrich creates this appropriately wistful tone through the accumulation of telling details—the perpetual squeak of the door to her apartment, the way Crawford uneasily covers her mouth in the rare moments she ventures to laugh, and the like. Crawford responds superbly to this director's perceptive guidance; her work is rich and varied while devoid of her more artificial great-lady mannerisms. She was an old hand by now at playing stoic masochists whose unselfish intentions bring them heaps of undeserved suffering, and the mixed blessing of encroaching age gives this characterization added poignance.

Unfortunately, *Autumn Leaves* is marred by an array of unconvincing performances in ill-conceived secondary roles, which was a depressingly commonplace event in later Crawford vehicles. Robertson makes the crucial error of tipping his manic hand from the moment



AUTUMN LEAVES (1956). With Cliff Robertson.

he appears on screen. From the outset he is so blatantly peculiar that even the most desolate of old maids would keep company with such a crackpot only attended by a few white-jacketed keepers. His nemeses, as impersonated by Lorne Greene and Vera Miles, seem if anything more eccentric than he is; they execute their dialogue as if it were encased in comic-strip balloons. Such lapses prevent *Autumn Leaves* from achieving the very real pathos it aims for.

Crawford once more succumbs to a psychopath's charms in *The Story of Esther Costello*, made the following year. It was directed by *Sudden Fear's* David Miller, and was her first film produced in England. For the first time since *The Women* in 1939, she accepted what was basically the secondary female part, deferring to talented novice Heather Sears in the title role. *The Story of Esther Costello* is a curious combination of elements developed separately and with more depth in *The Miracle Worker* and *A Face in the Crowd*. Esther is a desperately impoverished Irish girl rendered both blind and deaf after

a horrible accident in her childhood. She is discovered living in a squalid hut by Crawford, a wealthy American on a visit to her birthplace in the Ould Sod, and is taken by the shocked matron back to the States for a proper education. Esther's progress at braille and such is miraculous under Crawford's tutelage, and soon the two of them are lecturing nonstop to spread the inspirational saga of Esther's deliverance from poverty and ignorance. These activities snowball into an international charity drive known as the Esther Costello Fund, the lucrativeness of which attracts the attention of Joan's greasy ex-spouse, Rossano Brazzi. He assumes control of the Fund and begins to glance lecherously in blossoming Esther's direction, which Joan is too overjoyed at their reunion to notice. Disaster finally strikes when Brazzi can no longer contain himself and brutally rapes Esther. The experience is so traumatizing that Esther regains both her sight and hearing as a result. With Esther in shock and the Fund clouded by scandal, Joan forces Brazzi into her auto at gunpoint, and demolishes the car with both herself and Brazzi trapped inside.

Esther Costello could have been a genuinely moving study of an afflicted young girl if someone had resisted the impulse of injecting all that melodramatic claptrap involving Brazzi. Many of the plot devices are so overwrought that the effect is unintentionally ludicrous; Brazzi's violation of Esther is accompanied by a furious thunderstorm, and when he finally gets his way with her, of course the French windows burst wide open, pouring rain all over the place. None of this is aided much by Brazzi's monotonous characterization; more than ever he seems to have learned his lines phonetically for *Esther Costello*.

Far more effective are the vignettes depicting the Barnum and Bailey extravaganzas concocted to promote the Esther Costello Fund. As a blind choir chants hymns and cheerleader types exhort money from the throngs jamming the arena, director David Miller vividly satirizes the shrewdly maudlin attempts of phony charity promoters to milk the sentiments of an all-too-gullible public. However, the film's real saving grace is Heather Sears. Even apart from the fact that her assumed handicaps are made to seem absolutely real, Sears endows her role with a luminous sincerity which only exposes the phoniness of everything else around her.

Crawford's contribution is more prosaic, as this rather standard role really presented her with no new challenges. She had had plenty of practice playing women whose

THE STORY OF ESTHER COSTELLO (1957). With Rossano Brazzi.

THE STORY OF ESTHER COSTELLO (1957). With Heather Sears.

heady emotions obscured their judgment, only to be betrayed by the worthless men to whom they had entrusted their souls. Although she fails to bring any fresh insight to this twice-told characterization, her work is as accomplished and colorful as was always expected of her.

In a certain sense *The Story of Esther Costello* marked the end of a long histrionic road for Crawford. Now around fifty, she had prolonged her career as a romantic heroine to almost unprecedented lengths. By 1957, the system that had been the spawning ground for these efforts was in its death throes, and the less coherent regime in its wake wasn't equipped for or particularly interested in fabricating the kind of streamlined glamour product that was her staple. Crawford had finally reached that point of no return in her career that eventually befalls every actress. After *Esther Costello* she was destined exclusively for character roles, relinquishing the bittersweet pang of movie romance to a younger generation of actresses. Crawford accepted her lot with equanimity. What mattered most was to keep her career going, and if strong supporting roles (with star billing, of course) were the most promising means to that end, so be it.

BLOOD AND PEPSI

Her resolve to bend to this disconcerting turn of events was clinched by her appearance in *The Best of Everything* in 1959. Shortly after her husband's sudden death, she accepted her old friend Jerry Wald's bid to make this inevitable transition with a brief but vivid role in the film version of Rona Jaffe's soggy saga of white-collar lambs pursued by gray-flannel wolves.

Crawford's presence even in a subsidiary role is a most welcome respite from the gilded trash that surrounds her in this effort. Surely the story line held no surprises for her, as *The Best of Everything* is nothing more than *Sally, Irene and Mary*, gussied up in De Luxe Color and CinemaScope. The script and the novel it's based on are veritable lexicons of smug and hackneyed notions of the lowly destinies appropriate for modern American women; the attitudes are so retrogressive that even Amelia Bloomer would have been mortified. The message is simple, if contradictory —men are all beasts who are only after one thing; yet the pursuit of the right man is still the only game in town worth playing. The worst fate of all is to be saddled with serious career ambitions, for professional women are destined to become mere hollow and lonely travesties of femininity.

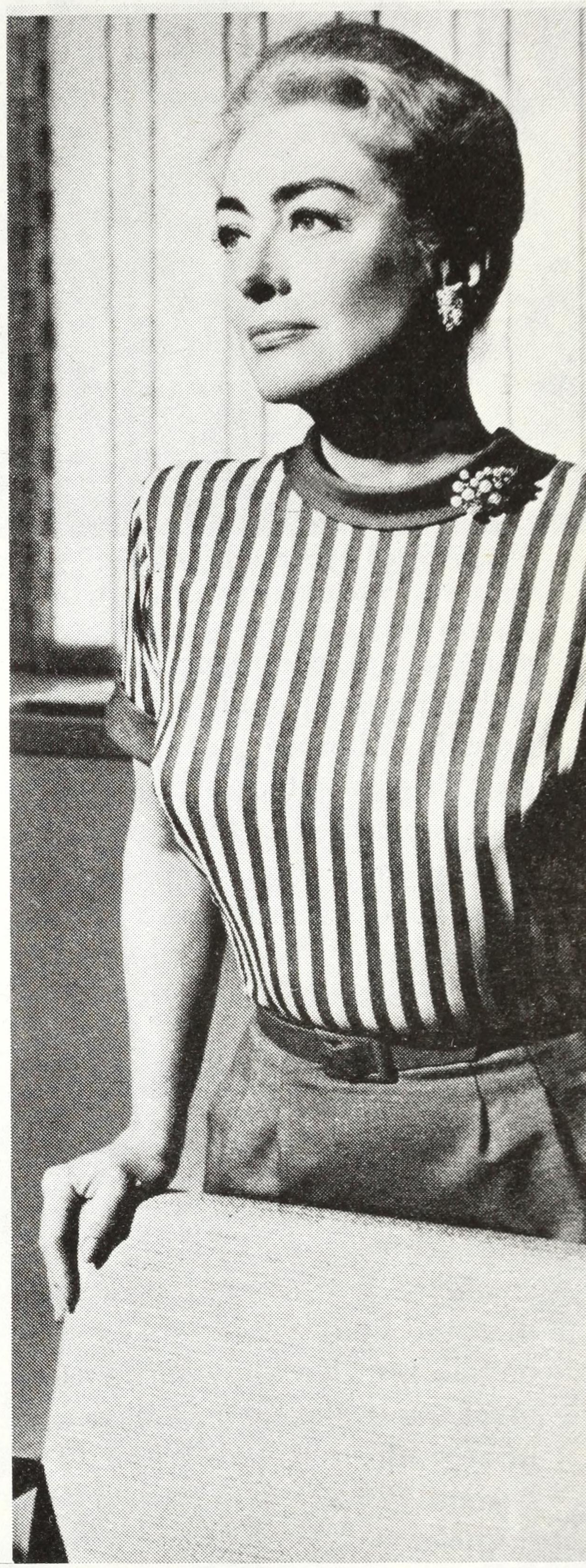
The three little typing-pool innocents who inhabit this fable learn their sorry lesson in a variety of ways. Sweet Diane Baker becomes pregnant by socially prominent Robert Evans and tries to commit suicide when he won't marry her. Sophisticated Suzy Parker becomes involved with noted theatrical director Louis Jourdan, whose abandonment of her causes her to go insane and totter to her death from a fire escape. Smart Hope Lange is misguided enough to want a career in publishing, until gruff Stephen Boyd convinces her of the greater glories derived from crabgrass and kiddies. This swill is rendered even more offensive by the hypocrisy with which it is presented. Under its leering facade of amoral liaisons, attempted abortions and the like is an underlying philosophy as rigidly puritanical as "The Pilgrim's Progress."

Although her part is really just a glorified bit, Crawford is by far the most arresting person in this tawdry film. She plays formidable Amanda Farrow, the holy terror of the publishing house employing these benighted girls. A tough and ruthless editor, she browbeats her inferiors with the venomous cruelty of a white-collar Lucretia Borgia. Her

love life is limited to one cheerless weekly encounter with a married man until she temporarily decides to chuck her career for a matrimonial fling with a widowed industrialist. Before long she returns to her old post, chagrined by the realization that it was too late for her to adjust to the simple joys of domesticity, and reconciles herself to eternal spinsterhood in her executive suite.

Crawford brings authority to this banal role, making the character interestingly slinky and feline rather than merely a strident shrike. Her voice oozes the epithets like treacle—the barbs are in the words themselves, never in the honeyed sound. It is also pleasant to see her reunited with Brian Aherne, her co-star in *I Live My Life* a quarter century before, here playing her publishing cohort. There were no scenes planned for them together in the original shooting script, but Aherne protested that their old fans would expect at least one joint appearance, so he wrote one for them himself. Their brief tandem sequence has an easygoing assurance totally absent from the rest of the picture. Despite their efforts *The Best of Everything* is but another of the innumerable later Crawford films distinguished solely by her presence.

Three years were to pass before she appeared again on screen. Like



THE BEST OF EVERYTHING (1959).
As Amanda Farrow.

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING (1959). With Hope Lange and Suzy Parker.

most of her contemporaries, she had increasing trouble finding parts suitable to her age and stature as a star. Television took up some of the slack; from the late fifties up to the present she has appeared often in guest spots on such series as *Zane Grey Theater*, *The Virginian*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Rod Serling's Night Gallery*, and *The Sixth Sense*, as well as starring in a feature-length television effort called *Della*, with Diane Baker.

The omens for her reentry into films in 1962 were anything but auspicious. For months producer-director Robert Aldrich tried to peddle his idea for a horror story involving two aging has-beens shut up together in a decrepit Hollywood mansion, and every film financier in town shrugged with indifference. Warners finally took a gamble on *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and the result was the sleeper hit of the year. Produced for less than a million dollars, the film returned four times that amount in America alone.

Baby Jane's extraordinary popular success really should have surprised no one; shrill and outlandish as it is, the movie is gruesome fun. The script by Lukas Heller is taut and witty despite its illogical lapses, and Aldrich has just the right perverse sense of cruel humor to carry the project off. Most important of all, teaming Davis and Crawford was an extraordinary casting coup. To some, their joint appearance was the inevitable consequence of decades spent manufacturing contrasting screen personalities. As Andrew Sarris wrote in *The Village Voice* after the film's release: "Poor Joan Crawford trapped upstairs in her wheelchair and menaced by crazy

Bette Davis downstairs—the screen's eternal masochist confronting the screen's eternal sadist. What could be more fitting . . .?"

The storyline is only a loose framework for the freewheeling battle of half-wits between the two stars. Davis is "Baby Jane" Hudson, once-beloved child star of vaudeville who has become a slatternly grotesque living on alcohol and faded *Variety* clippings. Although her face is a bloated caricature and her voice a ragged croak, she is maniacally obsessed with the absurd notion of trying a show-business comeback. Crawford plays sister Blanche, a movie legend of the thirties cut down at her peak by a freak accident supposedly caused by Jane, which has left her a paraplegic. Ravaged by guilt, liquor, and envy, Jane sinks ever deeper into raving looniness and wages a campaign of torture against her helpless sister, considering her the cause of her sordid present. Superficially, this thread of plot serves as an excuse for Bette's chilling outbursts of mayhem. But what really makes the film fascinating is the sheer intensity and histrionic prowess of these actresses, sinking their molars into the meatiest roles they had had in eons.

Davis, with the more flamboyant part and considerably greater screen footage, stole most of the attention with a characterization of uncommon vividness. She careens around that gloomy nightmare of a house looking like a superannuated kewpie doll, batting her beaded eyelashes and sputtering her rau-

With David McCallum and Robert Vaughn in a 1967 episode of "The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE? (1962).
As Blanche Hudson.

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE? (1962).
With Bette Davis.

cous wisecracks with enormous wit and relish. Yet Davis even manages to imbue this freak with an unexpected wistfulness when the situation calls for it. Her off-screen feud with Crawford only served to add a wry seasoning to her sadistic manhandling of her on-screen invalid sister. Best of all is her wicked parody of Joan as she telephones the liquor store for reinforcements —her mimicry of Crawford's broadened A's and liquid-butter diction is devastatingly cruel in its accuracy.

As Davis' catalyst and punching bag, Crawford is appropriately far more subdued; her tense calm and rational demeanor are the perfect foil for Davis' orb-popping craziness. In playing a former film luminary solaced by her past achievements, Crawford endows Blanche with powerful reverberations of Crawford's own history as a preeminent star. Blanche is first introduced on screen sitting mesmerized by a TV showing of Crawford's own *Sadie McKee*, and she positively glows with the recollection of the

young and vital actress flickering on the black-and-white tube before her. The contrast between the once and present Joan is more pointedly emphasized later on, when the desiccated near-corpse Bette has made her is extended limply beneath an illuminated portrait of the glamourous Crawford of a quarter-century past.

Even strapped to a wheelchair and emaciated almost beyond recognition, Crawford is a force to be reckoned with, and she gives her most disciplined performance since *Sudden Fear*. Her big scene consists of her attempt to drag herself downstairs to the phone for help while Davis is out of the house, and Crawford's agonizing efforts to pull the dead weight of her legs down the banister is achingly convincing. After Bette bursts in and discovers her by the door, the fear expressed by Crawford's stuttering childlike whimper is even more terrifying than the excruciating once-over Davis hands her in response. In its way her contribution is every bit as brilliant as Davis'. Regrettably she has done nothing since to approach it.

The immediate effect of *Baby Jane*'s popularity was to inspire a rash of cheap imitations, and for a time almost every middle-aged *ex grande* movie *dame* save Mary Pickford and Garbo staggered out of

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE? (1962).
With Bette Davis.

THE CARETAKERS (1963). As Lucretia Terry.

semi-retirement for a faltering whack at it. Neither Davis nor Crawford were immune to the temptation themselves, and they have spent most of the past decade on screen either ducking or perpetrating bedlam of one sort or another. Unfortunately, the farther they strayed from the original source the more ramshackle these efforts became.

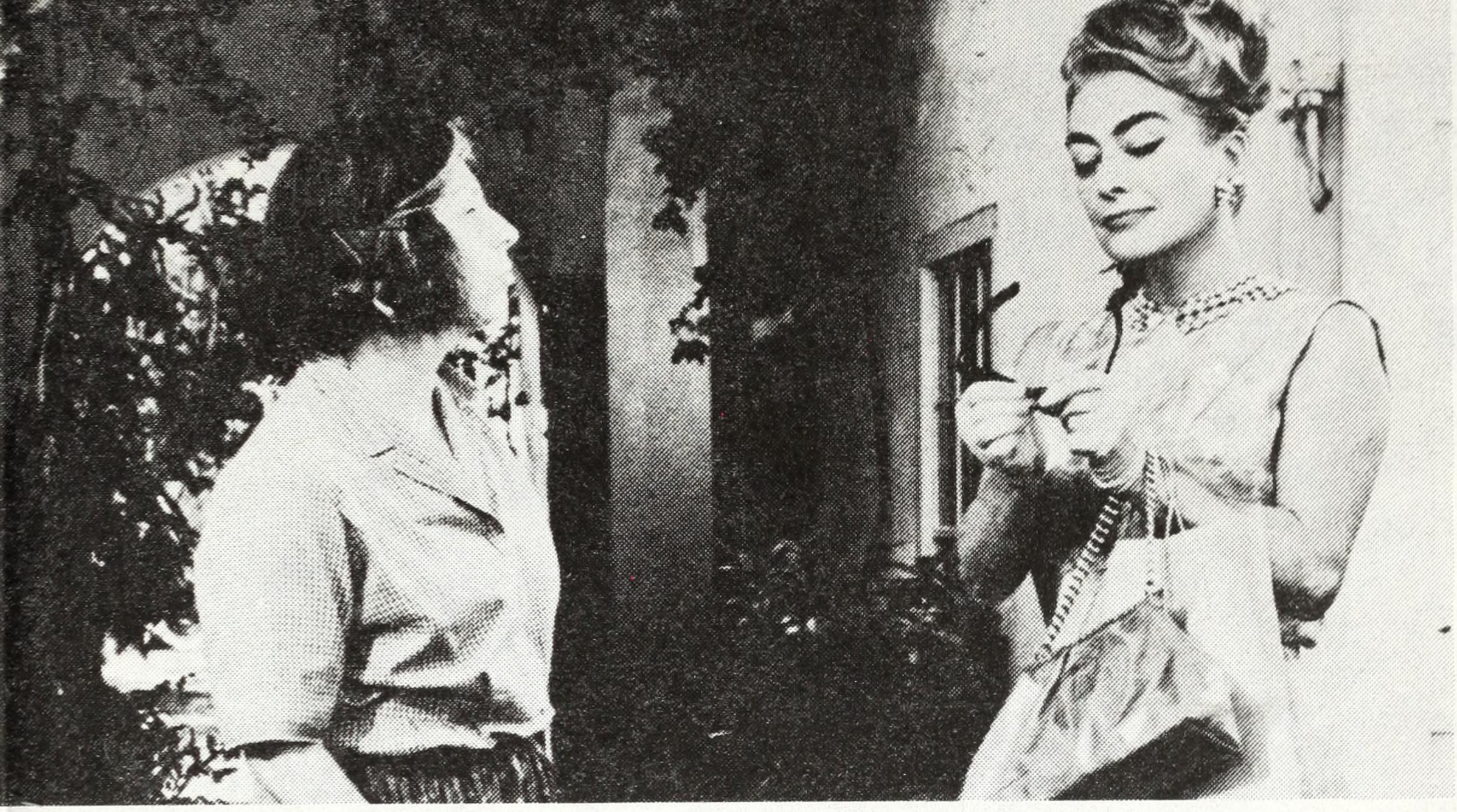
Crawford next set out to show she could dish it out as well as take it in *The Caretakers* (1963), a tiresome rehash of *The Snake Pit*. Polly Bergen plays a disturbed young woman who is dispatched to a padded cell in an antiquated asylum apparently modeled on the likes of San Quentin. The forces for good in the hospital are represented by Robert Stack, who wants to burn all the strait-jackets and haul his patients off to group-therapy sessions. Head psychiatric nurse Crawford is malice incarnate, a harridan who would like to shackle the inmates in solitary and throw away the keys to their cellblocks. Stack eventually prevails, but not before Bergen is raped by a gang of male inmates and Joan threatens dire revenge if Stack's schemes are carried out.

All this is as tedious as it is unconvincing, and the good intentions of the theme are continually sabotaged by the clichés studding the scenario. Crawford's most indelible moment in the film finds her arrayed in black leotards while in-

STRAIT JACKET (1964).
As Lucy Harbin.

structing her tough female wardens in the feminine art of judo. Even when garbed in customary nurse's togs, her eyes blaze and her jaw juts with the tautness of a vise. Throughout she does her energetic best by this one-dimensional character. Yet what scant distinction the film had came from Janis Paige as a loud-mouthed nymphomaniac under Stack's care.

Strait Jacket (1964), was, if possible, even more lurid. Typical of the tawdry Grade-B entries churned out for years by horror merchant William Castle, *Strait Jacket* offers twice the gore of *Baby Jane* without any of its compensating irony or imagination. Crawford impersonates a middle-aged parolee from an asylum for the criminally insane, where she had been incarcerated twenty years before for having hacked her husband to bits with an axe after discovering him in bed with another woman. She is released under the recognizance of her now-grown daughter (Diane Baker), ostensibly cured, but when severed heads start rolling about the countryside with astonishing frequency, Joan is naturally the prime suspect. As it happens, innocuous daughter Diane is behind all these homicidal goings-on; as an infant she witnessed the dismembering of her father and the experience turned her into a closet psychopath. Crawford is vindicated but compelled to carry the guilt of

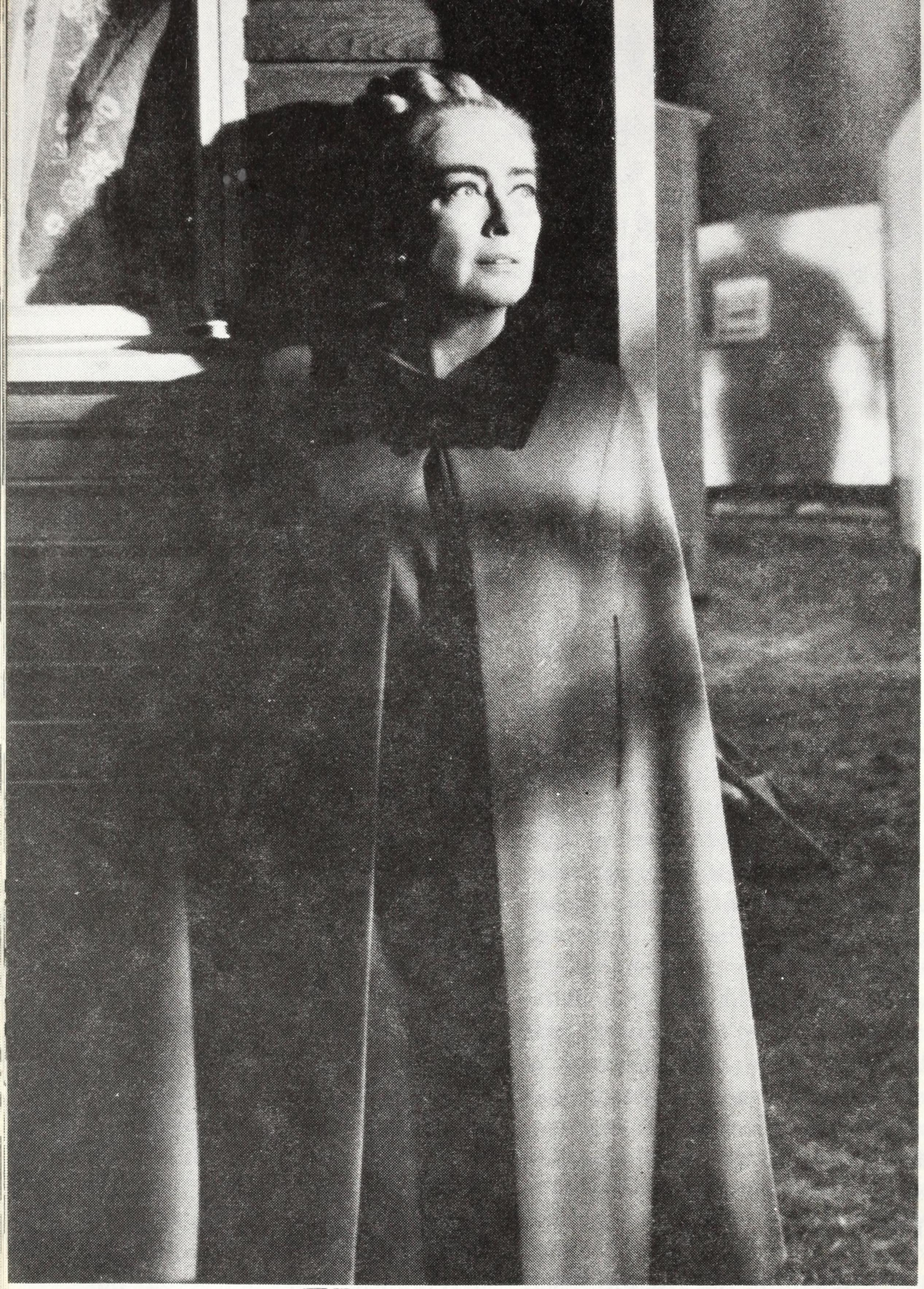


HUSH . . . HUSH, SWEET CHARLOTTE (1965). With Agnes Moorehead in a film she never completed. (She was replaced by Olivia de Havilland.)

her legacy to her daughter for the rest of her life.

Made on a miniscule budget with no ingenuity whatever, *Strait Jacket* is a shoddy showcase for Crawford's still formidable presence. She runs the gamut from murderous rage to neurotic insecurity to maternal concern with her customary ease, but it is embarrassing to watch her expend her efforts on blatant tripe like this. For all the excesses of *Baby Jane*, this marked her first descent into the realm of self-conscious camp, and her shrill attempted seduction of a character half her age is the most degrading scene she had ever been forced to play.

The following year she was slated for a reunion with Bette Davis and Robert Aldrich in a higher-budgeted follow-up to *Baby Jane* entitled *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte.* However, a prolonged illness prevented her from fulfilling her committments, and Olivia de Havilland was paged to replace her as Bette's nemesis in this tale of corpses in Dixie. Later on that year Crawford appeared instead in another William Castle outing, called *I Saw What You Did.* Although she received top billing, Crawford appears only briefly in this homicidal enterprise. As in *Queen Bee* she is John Ireland's frustrated inamorata; this time he gets rid of her with a carving knife after first polishing off his troublesome spouse. Most of the plot centered on Ireland's murderous pursuit of two adolescents whom he



BERSERK (1968). As Monica Rivers.

TROG (1970). With Kim Braden.

thinks witnessed the crime, but what little critical attention the film garnered went properly to Crawford for her skillful cameo.

Absent from the screen for the next three years, in 1968 she journeyed to England for yet another bloodbath in *Berserk*. Concocted from an odd mixture of both old and recent Crawford plot formulae, *Berserk* basically presents *Mildred Pierce* as *Strait-Jacket*ed under the Big Top. Here Crawford is an ambitious circus owner whose professional duties have prevented her from exercising proper solicitude for her rebellious teen-aged daughter (Judy Geeson). The years of neglect have turned the daughter into a murderous psychopath who commits a series of homicides amidst the sawdust and tinsel, for which Crawford is at first suspected. True to the traditions of the genre, the girl gets her just deserts and Crawford grieves for her past errors. Although really no better than the sleazy programmers she had been tackling ever since *Baby Jane*, at least *Berserk* permitted Crawford to exude a facsimile of the old pizazz that had been totally lacking in her

more recent assignments. As queen of this menagerie she got to have affairs with men decades younger than she, bark orders at underlings in her most authoritative manner, and display her still-shapely figure in wide-mesh tights, while cracking the ringmaster's whip with her customary panache.

Her most recent film to date has been the 1970 British-made *Trog*, and the lowest enterprise to which she has ever subjected herself. Crawford appears implausibly as an anthropologist; Trog is her cute nickname for the prehistoric half-man, half-ape she has discovered in a cave under a deserted moor. The ignorant townspeople refuse to let her alone to conduct her experiments with the beast, and thanks to their meddling Trog runs riot and terrorizes the countryside. As is the fate of all movie monsters he is finally destroyed, to Crawford's sorrow and the audience's indifference. The script is a running joke and Trog all too obviously a burly actor in a papier-mâché monkey mask. Crawford is hardly required to bother with acting at all; it is sufficient that she is merely present and keeps a straight face no matter what happens.

Now over sixty-five, Crawford lives alone in a spacious apartment in New York City. Her two older children are well into their thirties and even her twin daughters Cathy and Cynthia have married and lead inconspicuous lives far from the limelight in which their mother gratefully basks. Crawford remains the indefatigable businesswoman, only deviating from her hectic schedule at Pepsi to accept occasional television roles. Yet only the foolhardy would suggest that she has finally made her swan song to the screen, henceforth to be admired only in retrospectives culled from her past triumphs. She has always managed somehow to defy the rules of probability and return to the spotlight with yet another adroit variation on the personality she has worked so long to fabricate. Inevitably some movie role will come along calling for that unique alchemy of style and skill which Crawford has been conjuring up through the decades. And with the fiftieth anniversary of her film debut looming in 1975, she will no doubt be equal to the challenge.

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THE FILMS OF JOAN CRAWFORD

The director's name follows the release date. A (c) following the release date indicates that the film was in color. Sp indicates Screenplay and b/o indicates based/on.

THE SILENT YEARS

1. PRETTY LADIES. MGM, 1925. *Monta Bell*
2. OLD CLOTHES. MGM, 1925. *Eddie Cline*
3. THE ONLY THING. MGM, 1925. *Jack Conway*
4. SALLY, IRENE AND MARY. MGM, 1925. *Edmund Goulding*
5. THE BOOB. MGM, 1926. *William A. Wellman*
6. TRAMP, TRAMP, TRAMP. First National, 1926. *Harry Edwards*
7. PARIS. MGM, 1926. *Edmund Goulding*
8. THE TAXI DANCER. MGM, 1927. *Harry Millarde*
9. WINNERS OF THE WILDERNESS. MGM, 1927. *W.S. Van Dyke*
10. THE UNDERSTANDING HEART. MGM, 1927. *Jack Conway*
11. THE UNKNOWN. MGM, 1927. *Tod Browning*
12. TWELVE MILES OUT. MGM, 1927. *Jack Conway*
13. SPRING FEVER. MGM, 1927. *Edward Sedgwick*
14. WEST POINT. MGM, 1928. *Edward Sedgwick*
15. ROSE MARIE. MGM, 1928. *Lucien Hubbard*
16. ACROSS TO SINGAPORE. MGM, 1928. *William Nigh*
17. THE LAW OF THE RANGE. MGM, 1928. *William Nigh*
18. FOUR WALLS. MGM, 1928. *William Nigh*
19. OUR DANCING DAUGHTERS. MGM, 1928. *Harry Beaumont*
20. DREAM OF LOVE. MGM, 1928. *Fred Niblo*
21. THE DUKE STEPS OUT. MGM, 1929. *James Cruze*
22. OUR MODERN MAIDENS. MGM, 1929. *Jack Conway*

THE SOUND YEARS

23. HOLLYWOOD REVUE OF 1929. MGM, 1929. *Charles F. Reisner.* Sp: Al Boasberg and Robert Hopkins. Cast: John Gilbert, Norma Shearer, Marion Davies, Buster Keaton, Lionel Barrymore, Bessie Love, Marie Dressler, Conrad Nagel, William Haines, Jack Benny, Charles King, Cliff Edwards, Polly Moran, Laurel and Hardy.

24. UNTAMED. MGM, 1929. *Jack Conway*. Sp: Sylvia Thalberg, Frank Butler and Willard Mack, b/o story by Charles E. Scoggins. Cast: Robert Montgomery, Ernest Torrence, Gwen Lee, Holmes Herbert, John Miljan.

25. MONTANA MOON. MGM. 1930. *Malcolm St. Clair*. Sp: Sylvia Thalberg and Frank Butler. Cast: Johnny Mack Brown, Dorothy Sebastian, Ricardo Cortez, Cliff Edwards, Karl Dane.

26. OUR BLUSHING BRIDES. MGM, 1930. *Harry Beaumont*. Sp: Bess Meredyth, John Howard Lawson, and Edwin Justus Mayer, b/o story by Bess Meredyth. Cast: Robert Montgomery, Anita Page, Dorothy Sebastian, Raymond Hackett, John Miljan.

27. PAID. MGM, 1930. *Sam Wood*. Sp: Charles MacArthur, b/o play *Within the Law* by Bayard Veiller. Cast: Robert Armstrong, Marie Prevost, Kent Douglass, Polly Moran, John Miljan.

28. DANCE, FOOLS, DANCE. MGM, 1931. *Harry Beaumont*. Sp: Richard Schayer and Aurania Rouverol, b/o story by Aurania Rouverol. Cast: Lester Vail, Clark Gable, Cliff Edwards, Natalie Moorhead.

29. LAUGHING SINNERS. MGM, 1931. *Harry Beaumont*. Sp: Bess Meredyth and Martin Flavin, b/o play *Torch Song* by Kenyon Nicholson. Cast: Clark Gable, Neil Hamilton, Marjorie Rambeau, Cliff Edwards, Guy Kibbee, Roscoe Karns.

30. THIS MODERN AGE. MGM, 1931. *Nicholas Grinde*. Sp: Sylvia Thalberg and Frank Butler, b/o story by Mildred Cram. Cast: Pauline Frederick, Neil Hamilton, Monroe Owsley, Hobart Bosworth.

31. POSSESSED. MGM, 1931. *Clarence Brown*. Sp: Lenore Coffee, b/o play *The Mirage* by Edgar Selwyn. Cast: Clark Gable, Wallace Ford, Skeets Gallagher, Frank Conroy, John Miljan.

32. LETTY LYNTON. MGM, 1932. *Clarence Brown*. Sp: John Meehan and Wanda Tuchock, b/o novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes. Cast: Robert Montgomery, Nils Asther, Lewis Stone, May Robson, Louise Closser Hale, Emma Dunn.

33. GRAND HOTEL. MGM, 1932. *Edmund Goulding*. Sp: William A. Drake, b/o novel and play by Vicki Baum. Cast: Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Lionel Barrymore, Lewis Stone, Jean Hersholt, Rafaela Ottiano.

34. RAIN. United Artists, 1932. *Lewis Milestone.* Sp: Maxwell Anderson, b/o story "Miss Thompson" by W. Somerset Maugham and play by John Colton and Clemence Randolph. Cast: Walter Huston, William Gargan, Beulah Bondi, Matt Moore, Kendall Lee, Guy Kibbee, Walter Catlett.

35. TODAY WE LIVE. MGM, 1933. *Howard Hawks.* Sp: Edith Fitzgerald and Dwight Taylor, b/o story by William Faulkner. Cast: Gary Cooper, Robert Young, Franchot Tone, Roscoe Karns, Louise Closser Hale.

36. DANCING LADY. MGM, 1933. *Robert Z. Leonard.* Sp: Allen Rivkin and P.J. Wolfson, b/o novel by James Warner Bellah. Cast: Clark Gable, Franchot Tone, May Robson, Winnie Lightner, Fred Astaire, Robert Benchley, Nelson Eddy, The Three Stooges.

37. SADIE McKEE. MGM, 1934. *Clarence Brown.* Sp: John Meehan, b/o story by Viña Delmar. Cast: Franchot Tone, Gene Raymond, Edward Arnold, Esther Ralston, Jean Dixon, Leo Carrillo, Akim Tamiroff.

38. CHAINED. MGM, 1934. *Clarence Brown.* Sp: John Lee Mahin, b/o story by Edgar Selwyn. Cast: Clark Gable, Otto Kruger, Stuart Erwin, Una O'Connor, Akim Tamiroff.

39. FORSAKING ALL OTHERS. MGM, 1934. *W.S. Van Dyke.* Sp: Joseph L. Mankiewicz, b/o play by Edward Barry Roberts and Frank Morgan Cavett. Cast: Clark Gable, Robert Montgomery, Charles Butterworth, Billie Burke, Rosalind Russell, Frances Drake, Arthur Treacher.

40. NO MORE LADIES. MGM, 1935. *Edward H. Griffith and George Cukor.* Sp: Donald Ogden Stewart and Horace Jackson, b/o play by A.E. Thomas. Cast: Robert Montgomery, Franchot Tone, Charles Ruggles, Edna May Oliver, Gail Patrick, Reginald Denny, Arthur Treacher.

41. I LIVE MY LIFE. MGM, 1935. *W.S. Van Dyke.* Sp: Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Gottfried Reinhardt, Ethel Borden, b/o story by A. Carter Goodloe. Cast: Brian Aherne, Frank Morgan, Aline MacMahon, Jessie Ralph, Eric Blore, Arthur Treacher, Hedda Hopper.

42. THE GORGEOUS HUSSY. MGM, 1936. *Clarence Brown.* Sp: Ainsworth Morgan and Stephen Morehouse Avery, b/o novel by Samuel Hopkins Adams. Cast: Robert Taylor, Lionel Barrymore, Franchot Tone, Melvyn Douglas, James Stewart, Beulah Bondi, Alison Skipworth, Louis Calhern, Melville Cooper.

43. LOVE ON THE RUN. MGM, 1936. *W.S. Van Dyke.* Sp: John Lee Mahin, Manuel Seff and Gladys Hurlbut, b/o story by Alan Green and Julian Brodie. Cast: Clark Gable, Franchot Tone, Reginald Owen, Mona Barrie.

44. THE LAST OF MRS. CHEYNEY. MGM, 1937. *Richard Boleslawski.* Sp: Leon Gordon, Samson Raphaelson and Monckton Hoffe, b/o play by Frederick Lonsdale. Cast: William Powell, Robert Montgomery, Frank Morgan, Jessie Ralph, Nigel Bruce, Aileen Pringle, Melville Cooper.

45. THE BRIDE WORE RED. MGM, 1937. *Dorothy Arzner.* Sp: Tess Slesinger and Bradbury Foote, b/o play *The Girl from Trieste* by Ferenc Molnar. Cast: Franchot Tone, Robert Young, Billie Burke, Reginald Owen, George Zucco.

46. MANNEQUIN. MGM, 1938. *Frank Borzage.* Sp: Lawrence Hazard, b/o story by Katharine Brush. Cast: Spencer Tracy, Alan Curtis, Ralph Morgan, Mary Phillips, Oscar O'Shea, Leo Gorcey.

47. THE SHINING HOUR. MGM, 1938. *Frank Borzage.* Sp: Jane Murfin and Ogden Nash, b/o play by Keith Winter. Cast: Margaret Sullavan, Robert Young, Melvyn Douglas, Fay Bainter, Allyn Joslyn, Hattie McDaniel.

48. THE ICE FOLLIES OF 1939. MGM, 1939. *Reinhold Schunzel.* Sp: Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allan Woolf, b/o story by Leonard Praskins. Cast: James Stewart, Lew Ayres, Lewis Stone and the cast of the International Ice Follies. With Technicolor sequence.

49. THE WOMEN. MGM, 1939. *George Cukor.* Sp: Anita Loos and Jane Murfin, b/o play by Clare Boothe. Cast: Norma Shearer, Rosalind Russell, Mary Boland, Paulette Goddard, Joan Fontaine, Phyllis Povah, Virginia Weidler, Lucile Watson, Florence Nash, Ruth Hussey, Marjorie Main, Virginia Grey, Mary Beth Hughes.

50. STRANGE CARGO. MGM, 1940. *Frank Borzage.* Sp: Lawrence Hazard, b/o novel *Not Too Narrow, Not Too Deep* by Richard Sale. Cast: Clark Gable, Ian Hunter, Peter Lorre, Paul Lukas, Albert Dekker.

51. SUSAN AND GOD. MGM, 1940. *George Cukor.* Sp: Anita Loos, b/o play by Rachel Crothers. Cast: Fredric March, Ruth Hussey, John Carroll, Rita Hayworth, Nigel Bruce, Bruce Cabot, Rita Quigley, Rose Hobart, Marjorie Main, Constance Collier.

52. A WOMAN'S FACE. MGM, 1941. *George Cukor.* Sp: Donald Ogden Stewart, b/o play *Il Etait Une Fois* by Francois de Croisset. Cast: Melvyn Douglas,

Conrad Veidt, Osa Massen, Reginald Owen, Albert Basserman, Marjorie Main, Connie Gilchrist, Donald Meek, Richard Nichols.

53. WHEN LADIES MEET. MGM, 1941. *Robert Z. Leonard.* Sp: S.K. Lauren and Anita Loos, b/o play by Rachel Crothers. Cast: Robert Taylor, Greer Garson, Herbert Marshall, Spring Byington.

54. THEY ALL KISSED THE BRIDE. Columbia, 1942. *Alexander Hall.* Sp: P.J. Wolfson, b/o story by Gina Kaus and Andrew P. Solt. Cast: Melvyn Douglas, Roland Young, Billie Burke, Allen Jenkins.

55. REUNION IN FRANCE. MGM, 1942. *Jules Dassin.* Sp: Jan Lustig, Marvin Borowsky and Marc Connelly, b/o story by Ladislaus Bus-Fekete. Cast: John Wayne, Philip Dorn, Reginald Owen, Albert Basserman, John Carradine, Henry Daniell.

56. ABOVE SUSPICION. MGM, 1943. *Richard Thorpe.* Sp: Keith Winter, Melville Baker, Patricia Coleman, b/o novel by Helen MacInnes. Cast: Fred MacMurray, Conrad Veidt, Basil Rathbone, Reginald Owen, Cecil Cunningham, Felix Bressart.

57. HOLLYWOOD CANTEEN. Warner Bros., 1944. *Delmer Daves.* Sp: Delmer Daves. Cast: Joan Leslie, Robert Hutton, Dane Clark, Janis Paige, Jack Benny, Joe E. Brown, Eddie Cantor, Bette Davis, John Garfield, Sydney Greenstreet, Paul Henreid, Peter Lorre, Ida Lupino, Dennis Morgan, Eleanor Parker, Barbara Stanwyck, Jane Wyman.

58. MILDRED PIERCE. Warner Bros., 1945. *Michael Curtiz.* Sp: Ranald MacDougall and Catherine Turney, b/o novel by James M. Cain. Cast: Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, Eve Arden, Ann Blyth, Bruce Bennett, George Tobias, Butterfly McQueen.

59. HUMORESQUE. Warner Bros., 1946. *Jean Negulesco.* Sp: Clifford Odets and Zachary Gold, b/o story by Fannie Hurst. Cast: John Garfield, Oscar Levant, J. Carroll Naish, Ruth Nelson, Tom D'Andrea, Craig Stevens, Joan Chandler, Peggy Knudsen.

60. POSSESSED. Warner Bros., 1947. *Curtis Bernhardt.* Sp: Silvia Richards and Ranald MacDougall, b/o story by Rita Weiman. Cast: Van Heflin, Raymond Massey, Geraldine Brooks, Stanley Ridges.

61. DAISY KENYON. 20th Century-Fox, 1947. *Otto Preminger.* Sp: David Hertz, b/o novel by Elizabeth Janeway. Cast: Dana Andrews, Henry Fonda, Ruth Warrick, Martha Stewart, Peggy Ann Garner, Connie Marshall.

62. FLAMINGO ROAD. Warner Bros., 1949. *Michael Curtiz.* Sp: Robert Wilder, b/o play by Robert and Sally Wilder. Cast: Zachary Scott, David Brian, Sydney Greenstreet, Gladys George, Virginia Huston, Alice White.

63. IT'S A GREAT FEELING. Warner Bros., 1949. (c). *David Butler.* Sp: Jack Rose and Mel Shavelson, b/o story by I.A.L. Diamond. Cast: Dennis Morgan, Doris Day, Jack Carson, Gary Cooper, Edward G. Robinson, Danny Kaye, Errol Flynn, Ronald Reagan, Jane Wyman, Eleanor Parker, Patricia Neal.

64. THE DAMNED DON'T CRY. Warner Bros., 1950. *Vincent Sherman.* Sp: Harold Medford and Jerome Weidman, b/o story by Gertrude Walker. Cast: David Brian, Steve Cochran, Kent Smith, Richard Egan, Selena Royle.

65. HARRIET CRAIG. Columbia, 1950. *Vincent Sherman.* Sp: Anne Froelick and James Gunn, b/o play *Craig's Wife* by George Kelly. Cast: Wendell Corey, Lucile Watson, Allyn Joslyn, William Bishop, K.T. Stevens, Ellen Corby.

66. GOODBYE, MY FANCY. Warner Bros., 1951. *Vincent Sherman.* Sp: Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts, b/o play by Fay Kanin. Cast: Robert Young, Frank Lovejoy, Eve Arden, Janice Rule, Lurene Tuttle, Howard St. John, Ellen Corby.

67. THIS WOMAN IS DANGEROUS. Warner Bros., 1952. *Felix Feist.* Sp: Geoffrey Homes and George Worthing Yates, b/o story by Bernard Girard. Cast: Dennis Morgan, David Brian, Richard Webb, Mari Aldon, Sherry Jackson.

68. SUDDEN FEAR. RKO Radio, 1952. *David Miller.* Sp: Lenore Coffee and Robert Smith, b/o novel by Edna Sherry. Cast: Jack Palance, Gloria Grahame, Virginia Huston, Bruce Bennett, Michael Connors.

69. TORCH SONG. MGM, 1953. (c). *Charles Walters.* Sp: John Michael Hayes and Jan Lustig, b/o story by I.A.R. Wylie. Cast: Michael Wilding, Gig Young, Marjorie Rambeau, Henry Morgan, Dorothy Patrick.

70. JOHNNY GUITAR. Republic, 1954. (c). *Nicholas Ray.* Sp: Philip Yordan, b/o novel by Roy Chanslor. Cast: Sterling Hayden, Mercedes McCambridge, Scott Brady, Ward Bond, Ben Cooper, Ernest Borgnine, John Carradine.

71. FEMALE ON THE BEACH. Universal, 1955. *Joseph Pevney.* Sp: Robert Hill and Richard Alan Simmons, b/o play *The Besieged Heart* by Robert Hill. Cast: Jeff Chandler, Jan Sterling, Cecil Kellaway, Natalie Schafer, Charles Drake, Judith Evelyn.

72. QUEEN BEE. Columbia, 1955. *Ranald MacDougall.* Sp: Ranald MacDougall, b/o novel by Edna Lee. Cast: Barry Sullivan, Betsy Palmer, John Ireland, Lucy Marlow, Tim Hovey, Fay Wray.

73. AUTUMN LEAVES. Columbia, 1956. *Robert Aldrich.* Sp: Jack Jevne, Lewis Meltzer and Robert Blees. Cast: Cliff Robertson, Vera Miles, Lorne Greene, Ruth Donnelly, Shepperd Strudwick.

74. THE STORY OF ESTHER COSTELLO. Columbia, 1957. *David Miller.* Sp: Charles Kaufman, b/o novel by Nicholas Monserrat. Cast: Rossano Brazzi, Heather Sears, Lee Patterson, Ron Randell, Fay Compton, John Loder, Denis O'Dea, Bessie Love.

75. THE BEST OF EVERYTHING. 20th Century-Fox, 1959. (c). *Jean Negulesco.* Sp: Edith Sommer and Mann Rubin, b/o novel by Rona Jaffe. Cast: Hope Lange, Stephen Boyd, Suzy Parker, Martha Hyer, Diane Baker, Louis Jourdan, Brian Aherne, Robert Evans, Brett Halsey.

76. WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE? Warner Bros., 1962. *Robert Aldrich.* Sp: Lukas Heller, b/o novel by Henry Farrell. Cast: Bette Davis, Victor Buono, Marjorie Bennett, Anna Lee, Maidie Norman, Barbara Merrill.

77. THE CARETAKERS. United Artists, 1963. *Hall Bartlett.* Sp: Henry F. Greenberg, b/o story by Hall Bartlett and Jerry Paris. Cast: Robert Stack, Polly Bergen, Janis Paige, Diane McBain, Herbert Marshall, Barbara Barrie, Susan Oliver.

78. STRAIT JACKET. Columbia, 1964. *William Castle.* Sp: Robert Bloch. Cast: Diane Baker, Leif Erickson, Howard St. John, Rochelle Hudson, George Kennedy.

79. I SAW WHAT YOU DID. Universal, 1965. *William Castle.* Sp: William McGivern, b/o novel by Ursula Curtiss. Cast: John Ireland, Leif Erickson, Sara Lane, Andi Garrett, Patricia Breslin.

80. BERSERK. Columbia, 1968. (c). *Jim O'Connolly.* Sp: Herman Cohen and Aben Kandel. Cast: Ty Hardin, Diana Dors, Michael Gough, Judy Geeson, Robert Hardy, Geoffrey Keen.

81. TROG. Warner Bros., 1970. (c). *Freddie Francis.* Sp: Aben Kandel, b/o story by Peter Bryan and John Gilling. Cast: Michael Gough, Joe Cornelius, Kim Braden, Bernard Kay.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stephen Harvey was graduated from Stanford University in 1971 and has written for *Women's Wear Daily, Film Comment* and the Department of Film of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where he currently works.

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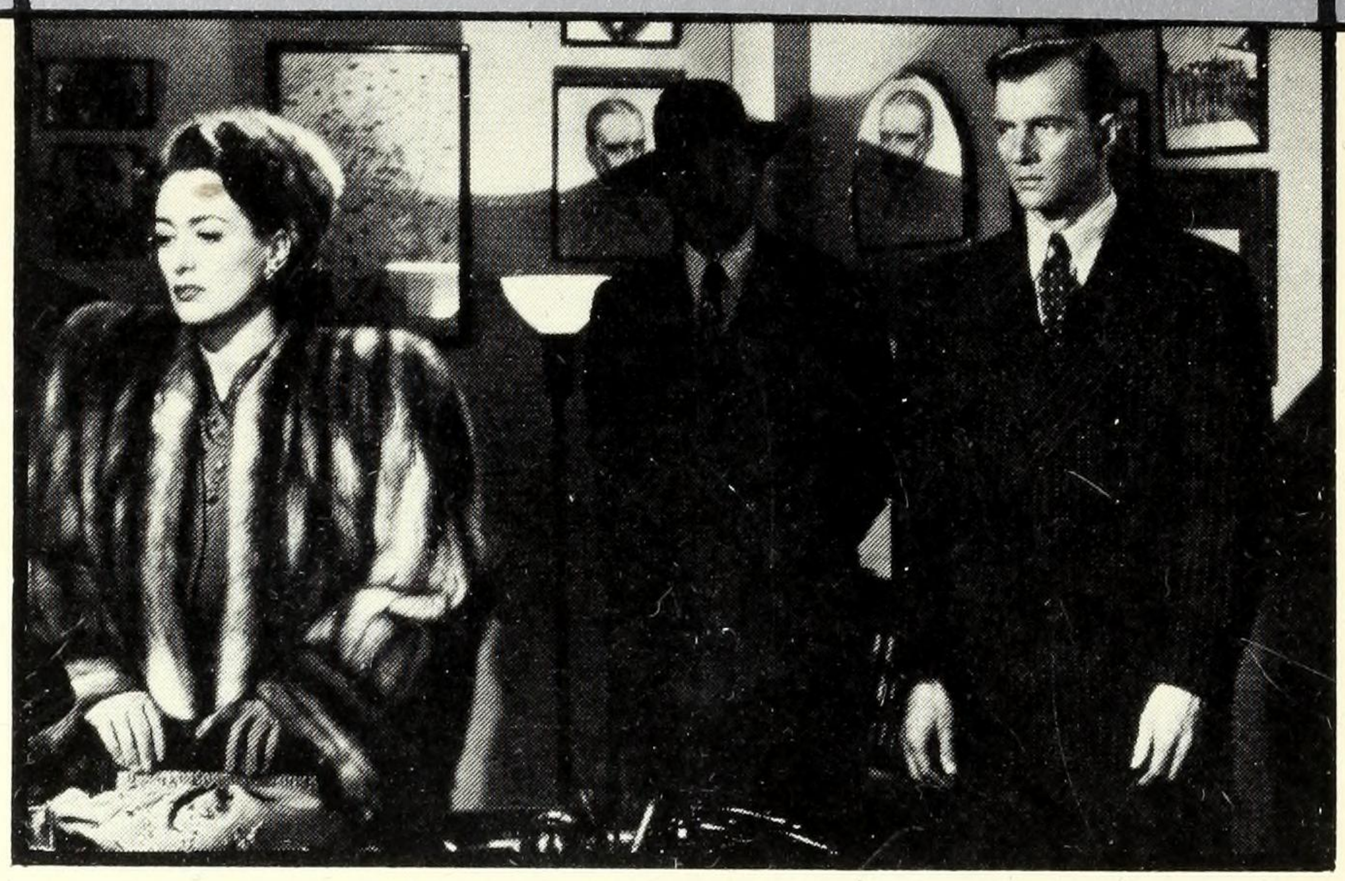
Ted Sennett is the author of *Warner Brothers Presents*, a survey of the great Warners films of the thirties and forties, and of *Lunatics and Lovers*, on the years of the "screwball" movie comedy. He has also written about films for magazines and newspapers. He lives in New Jersey with his wife and three children.

JOAN

CRAWFORD

by STEPHEN HARVEY



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—Joan Crawford in **Mildred Pierce**

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